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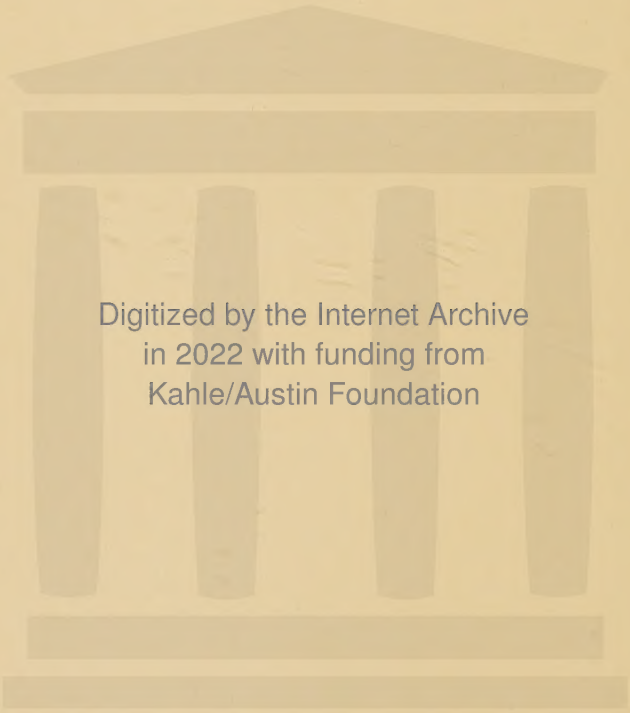

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WHEN FATHER CHRISTMAS WAS LATE

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Coningsby Dawson

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When Father Christmas Was Late

BY CONINGSBY DAWSON

ILLUSTRATED BY
JOSEPH E. SANDFORD

Mcmxxix

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A CHRISTMAS LEGEND OF HAMELIN TOWN

A Christmas Legend of Hamelin Town

CHRISTMAS EVE in Hamelin Town—the first since the children had been stolen!

Had you plodded through Hamelin's crooked streets, snow-carpeted as if by the drift of angels' feathers, you could still have espied faded posters offering gold to the Piper's heart's content if he would only restore the little people. You might even have met the town crier going his rounds, stopping every few hundred yards to ring his bell and announce:

"O, yes! O, yes! Whereas a certain gipsy musician, who calls himself the Pied Piper and is famed for his skill in rat catching, hath lured away our children, let it be known that for their return will be paid whatever ransom he demands, even to our last guilder. Proclaimed by order of the Mayor and Corporation."

He did not add, as would have been customary, "All's well on a frosty night. A merry Christmas to everybody!"

Nothing had been well since the children's sudden exodus, which had taken place in springtime, when fruit trees were a mist of blossom. Since then months of thwarted hope had elapsed. Every evening bereaved mothers had climbed to empty nurseries, promising themselves, "They will be here to-morrow." They had folded back coverings from cots, so that everything might wear an aspect of welcome. More than ever, this night, they missed the patter of tiny feet. From habit, and in an effort to deceive themselves, they had hung up little stockings. The Widow Swartz was the

only mother who had performed the Christmas ritual knowing that her presents would give pleasure.

Her little boy, Carl, who hobbled on a crutch, was the sole survivor of the vanished children's army. He lived down a side street near the river, in the humblest quarter of the town. His mother took in washing, which she scrubbed on the river bank. When there were banquets she helped in kitchens of the wealthy. Before the catastrophe the citizens of Hamelin had spoken of Widow Swartz as a deserving case and had pitied her because her son, even if he grew to manhood, could never be of much support to her. Since the spring, as the only mother whose child had been spared, she had become an object of envy.

Of course, you remember how the catastrophe had occurred. Hamelin had been infested with rats, which had grown so bold that they had fought the dogs and killed the cats and bitten the babies in the cradles. The citizens had gone in a body to the Mayor, threatening to fling him out of office if he didn't

find a remedy. The wretched man, who was immensely fat from overindulgence at public dinners, was at his wit's end when, seemingly from nowhere, up had sprung a quaint fellow offering to destroy the pests for the sum of a thousand guilders. No sooner uttered than his bargain was accepted. Producing a pipe, he had blown three shrill notes. There had followed a grumbling, which had swelled to a mighty rumbling; out of houses and cellars the rats had come tumbling. Frisking over and round him, they had swarmed in a crowd. He had led them as far as the river Weser, where they had promptly drowned.

The miracle had been performed too easily. The Mayor had scoffed at the miracle worker's claim to receive the bounty he had stipulated. In revenge the Pied Piper had played a second tune, more merry, more melodious. The Hamelin children, snatching their baby sisters and brothers, had come running. The same magic that had made them dance as round a maypole had held their elders speechless and rooted. Fathers and mothers had been com-

pelled to watch their darlings dance away through the grave old town to the Weser's banks, across the bridge and out into the blowy country, where they had completely vanished.

No one would ever have learned what had become of them had it not been for Carl, the little lame boy. On his crutch he had striven to keep pace with the frolicking procession. Bertha, his playmate and next-door neighbour, had tried to help him, as she had always done since the time when he had been too small to handle a crutch. As the music had swelled more maddeningly she had capered ahead till her conscience had reproached her. She had danced ahead again when, all of a sudden, the green side of the Koppelberg Mountain had opened. Hobbling with all his might, Carl had shouted:

"Wait for me. Please wait for me."

All the children save himself had entered. Slowly, as though unwilling to shut him out, the mountain was closing. At the last moment Bertha had glanced across her shoulder and started back that she might drag him through

in time. Too late. The mountain had rolled into place. He had found himself solitary, the music dwindling fainter; then no sound save a distant cuckoo calling.

As he was wandering home disconsolately he had been met by the hue-and-cry: men riding cart horses, labourers armed with scythes, women shaking broomsticks. Where was that thieving rogue, the Pied Piper? When Carl had told his story no one had believed him. Who had ever heard of a mountain opening? The chief constable had cuffed him, advising him not to tell lies. The pursuers had pushed farther afield, leaving him to hobble wearily back to his mother. Even she had refused to credit him.

"You're not lying, Carl, I know that. You're imaginative. But please don't repeat it. It's hard enough to earn a living; you'll set folks against us."

Meanwhile couriers had ridden far and wide. Not until the first excitement had quieted did the Mayor and Corporation remember that the children's army had left a survivor. Hav-

ing questioned him, they had armed the town guard with picks and shovels and ordered the boy to guide them to the very spot where he had imagined he saw the gateway. For a week the guard had dug. However deeply they had penetrated they had discovered nothing but stones and earth opposing them. So opinions had become divided regarding Carl's truthfulness. He might have mistaken the spot on the mountain. He might have been the victim of magic. In default of a better explanation his elders had at last conceded that probably something such as he described had happened.

It seemed extraordinary to Carl how being the only child in Hamelin had increased his value. In former days people had speculated as to why he had been born lame—whether the sin had been his dead father's or his mother's. Now they acted quite differently—as though his lameness were a proof of virtue. They were outspoken in saying they wished their children had been lame. Had they been cripples like Carl they too would have lagged behind and been too late to enter the mountain.

Changed sentiment transformed his mother from a woman to be blamed into a mother to be venerated. She was the only mother who had a child. All the childless mothers came to visit her in her side street, that they might bribe her to lend them Carl that they might fondle him. The Mayoress came. Wives of members of the Corporation came. The proudest and most disdainful beauties humbled themselves to court her. Carriages and menservants thronged the side street of Widow Swartz, as though her ramshackle cottage were a shrine and her lame boy a saint.

"What a cherub!" They tried to pick him up. "What an angel's face! He has fair hair like my little Wilhelm's."

When they mentioned Wilhelm, or Gretchen, or Hans, they wept unrestrainedly.

From a small person who had been less than nothing, Carl had bloomed into a celebrity. Gentlemen, prancing by on horses, dismounted to pat his head. The daintiest ladies delayed their steps to make a fuss over him.

But Carl wasn't happy. Streets were too

empty. Grown-ups might show themselves kinder; he longed for the little people.

On this first Christmas Eve since the children had been stolen, the Widow Swartz sat cuddling Carl on her lap. Sparkling embers of a never-too-prosperous fire were dying. She had been recounting the Bethlehem story. The room was growing chilly.

"I'll have to be tucking you in bed," she whispered. "Father Christmas mustn't find us awake. If you could tell him the desire you covet most what would you ask him?"

"I'm tired of playing alone, Motherkins. I want Bertha. I would ask that the children might come back."

Outside in the heavy snow they heard a crunching. The light from a passing lantern flashed. Was the traveller Santa Claus, the Pied Piper, or a robber?

Fears were laid to rest as his bell sounded, followed by the hoarse grumbling of his voice:

"O, yes! O, yes! Whereas a certain gipsy, famed for his skill in rat catching, hath lured

away our children . . . whatever ransom he demands. By order of the Mayor and Corporation."

"Do you think he will come, Mother?"

"Who?"

"Santa Claus."

"I haven't a doubt."

"I have." He dug his face into her bosom. "I have. He must have heard about Hamelin. He's too busy. Just for me he won't trouble to drive his reindeer to our town."

"He will."

"I don't think so, Mother." Carl shook his curly head. "And I don't think something else. I don't think there'll be a Christmas to-morrow. This year there weren't any toys in the shops. All the toy merchants have moved to places where there are children."

"The toy trade's been bad," she admitted. "But that's the more reason why Santa Claus should remember you."

"Do you remember last year," the boy persisted, "the hundreds of Christmas trees that were lighted—one in every window? And the

big one that the Mayor set up in front of the church, hung with thousands of candles?"

"How could I forget, darling?"

"I was wondering, Mother, whether Bertha and Gretchen and Hans have Christmas trees in that other land."

"But are you sure, Carl, that you did truly see that other land? Isn't it possible that you just imagined it?"

"I saw it, Mother." He reached up his arms, drawing her face down. "Haven't I shown you the very spot up on the mountain where they entered?"

"Yes. But you said there was a gateway. There was nothing but grass. Even the grass will be covered with snow to-night."

"But, listen, Mother. Because it's Christmas, don't you think if we went and called to them the children might hear us?"

She shook her head. "The fire's nearly out. We mustn't let Santa Claus surprise us."

"He won't surprise us, Mother. He won't come unless—we manage to get the other children."

When Carl had said his prayers and was snuggled beneath his blankets, the Widow Swartz did not undress. She sat beside him, watching how as sleep claimed him his seriousness relaxed and his face dimpled into smiling. She could guess what he was dreaming, for he dreamed it every night. He was peering again through the gateway in the mountain, seeing a land where everything was diminutive and lovely, full of flowering woods and doll's-house huts. In his sleep he began to murmur. She pieced together the scene. He hadn't been too late. He had scurried through the gateway in the mountain just in time. He was with Bertha, preparing for Christmas, decorating with mistletoe and holly. Now they'd hung up their stockings and were snuggling in their beds, squeezing their eyes tightly that Santa Claus might arrive sooner. In that other land he had no doubts concerning Santa Claus; it was only here in Hamelin that his lonely heart grew skeptical.

But what if he didn't—if Santa Claus should fail to come? If he didn't through considering

one child not worth his while, Carl would never again believe in Christmas. Something must be done to bring Santa Claus. What could an unprotected widow do at this late hour on a snowbound night?

Rising softly, she crept to the leaded panes. Her own solitariness gaped back at her. What a different Christmas Eve! How deserted! Snow lay untrodden, save by feet of the town crier. Windows stared blank and spectral. Yet over all, in the frosty sky, the Bethlehem star was shining.

She glanced across her shoulder at Carl. Did she dare desert him? If she were to go to Koppelberg Mountain and call, would the children hear her? Anything was worth trying. If she could persuade them to forsake their other land and accompany her Santa Claus would be sure to visit Hamelin. Carl would have a real Christmas. As long as he lived he would believe in Christmas. He would awake to-morrow to find gladness in the streets—children. It was the night of the infant Jesus. Faith could remove mountains.

Stealing a last look at her child, she crept down the creaking staircase. How cold it was outside! The night was bitter. Blank walls of houses, their eaves dripping icicles, seemed hostile to her errand. But far above, the bright eye of the Bethlehem star was cheerful.

Snow had drifted into banks. Past the Mayor's house she sped—the fat old Mayor who since the tragedy had become unpopular. No one spoke to him. No one attended his banquets. No one pitied him the loss of his three blond children.

"Serves him right," they said. "Our homes wouldn't be empty if he hadn't been too mean to pay the Piper."

The bridge across the Weser seemed built of glass. The Weser far below was solid.

Ahead loomed the Koppelberg Mountain. It looked so altered by shifting shadows that she doubted whether she could find the spot that Carl had indicated. There was a stream that ran by it, she remembered, and a coppice to the right.

Several times she missed her direction. Her feet and hands were numb. Wind swept the ice-bound country with a brittle sigh.

"Children! Children!" She knelt, sobbing. "Come home. It's Christmas."

To her amazement, beneath the snow-blanketed surface, she heard the shout of joyous voices.

"Children! Children! It's Christmas."

The mountain side bulged. In the twinkling of an eye a gateway had formed. Peering through it, the Widow saw tiny huts in a diminutive woodland, precisely as Carl had described. In the window of each hut was a tree which glittered with candles. Pouring out came the children, small feet pattering, wooden shoes clattering, little hands clapping, little tongues chattering—all the noisy boys and girls, with rosy cheeks and flaxen curls, sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls. They weren't a day older and were dancing just as merrily as when they had so heedlessly followed the Piper.

"Christmas! Christmas!" they sang. "Look

Hans! Look, Gretchen! Hurray for Christmas! It's been snowing."

Bertha was first to notice the ill-clad woman who knelt as in prayer.

"Why, you're Widow Swartz! How kind of you to fetch us!"

The other sprites jointed hands, forming a ring about her and chanting, "Did you hang up our stockings?"

Bertha divined the Widow's terror. Clasping her, she breathed into her face and eyes.

"We're not dead. If we were dead I couldn't hug you."

"But, children," the Widow gasped, recovering her senses, "you'll catch cold. You're not dressed for winter."

"We shan't. We never catch cold," they chorused.

"Oh, come," she implored, still dreading the Pied Piper. "Hurry home before your fathers and mothers waken."

"Home! Home!"

What a bedlam of shrill voices! Pell-mell they started like a pack of excited puppies.

They remembered the road. The boys and girls with no baby brothers and sisters to carry went scampering down the mountain side scuffling the snow so that it rose in a silver cloud.

Skies were growing gray; stars were waning. At a bend the jutting roofs and old-world towers of Hamelin leaped to sight. Across the bridge, caked with ice, which spanned the Weser, the children pelted. By the time Widow Swartz caught up, they were rattling knockers on the doors of their homes. Windows were popping up; nightcapped heads popping out. Of a sudden church bells began to peal and chime. The air rocked with music.

Long before she had reached her cottage in the side street every urchin had escaped her. What did that matter? She had brought them back. After days of mourning it was Christmas in Hamelin. As she entered Carl's room he was sitting up.

"Santa Claus has been, Mother."

She caught him to her breast.

"A merry Christmas, darling."

"A merry Christmas, Mother!"

"Quickly—dress quickly. I've a most wonderful secret."

But at that moment Bertha burst in on them, rosy-cheeked and starry-eyed.

"Carl, you ought to have been with us. I tried to drag you through the gateway."

They were locked in each other's arms.

So many questions to be asked.

"Was he kind to you?"

"Who?"

"The Pied Piper."

"We never saw him after the door had closed behind us."

"But what did you do? Tell me. Every night I've dreamed of you."

"Played. But don't waste time, Carl. What have you found in your stocking?"

Once more streets were full of laughing sprites, sliding, romping. Enmities were forgotten. Even the Mayor was forgiven. He spent most of the morning with anybody's children in the public square, building a snow man.

Carl, wandering with Bertha, was happy and unnoticed. The pretty ladies passed him, driving in their sleighs. Why should they notice him? Seated beside them, wrapped in furs, they had their own recovered darlings. As twilight fell, windows glowed with candles. From attics and cellars last year's toys had been raked out.

"You do believe in Christmas?" Widow Swartz urged her son.

For the thousandth time he assured her.

"But how did it happen, Mummy?"

"I called to them, and the side of the mountain opened."

"They were waiting to be called." The little boy nodded.

"Waiting! Yes, they seemed to be. I expect they were."

Later she asked him:

"Do you mind not being so important?"

"How do you mean, not so important, Mummy?"

"Not having everybody stop to speak to you the way they did when you were the only child."

"Why should I? I have Bertha."

What happiness! Fire in nurseries. Gossiping voices. Then the bed hour. Little people in long nightgowns, praying against their mothers. Soft faces cushioned on white pillows.

"God bless you, darling."

"And you, Mummy."

Tiptoeings down the stairs. No one asked how the children had returned. The Pied Piped seemed an evil better not mentioned. And yet how often the parents stole back to those nurseries! First the father peered in, then the mother.

"Still sleeping," he whispered.

And she, "Still sleeping."

It was a miracle incredible that they should ever have left them.

"Why did they? They seem as fond of us as ever."

"Fonder."

"To-morrow, when they're more used to us, we'll ask them."

But in the morning the alarm spread from house to house.

"Where's Gretchen? Where's Hans? Where's Wilhelm?"

In every nursery it was the same. Bedclothes were tossed back. Dents made by little heads were still fresh on the pillows. At an unguarded hour between midnight and dawning the mountain must have called; the children had vanished—all except the lame boy whom the mountain had rejected.

So in Hamelin the three hundred and sixty-four days, which stretched like a wilderness between Christmas and Christmas, scarcely counted. Its citizens lived for the sacred eve when, with the hanging up of stockings, if a mother went alone to the Koppelberg Mountain the child spirits would return. Year in, year out, the miracle continued, till another crop of children were born and themselves became parents.

When Carl himself grew up he became a toy merchant, married, and became a father. The finest doll he manufactured in any year he always reserved for Bertha.

"But why for Bertha?" his wife would protest.

"She was kind to me when I was helpless."

It was strange with what eagerness, each Christmas, he would wait for her. She was never a day older—a flaxen little girl who treated him like a child.

One Christmas he waited in vain. He was Mayor of Hamelin by then and nearly eighty. His grandchildren, clambering up his knees, strove to console him.

"What does Bertha matter, Grandpa? Who wants the other children? You have us."

Struggling from his chair, he summoned the Town Council. Its members assembled glumly. Things had reached a pretty pass, they said, when fathers of families couldn't stay in their homes on a holiday. Inquiring the reason for the absence of the other children, the old Mayor was informed that the last of the mothers whom the Pied Piper had robbed had died. As a consequence there had been no mother sufficiently interested to visit the mountain to call the lost children. They were too

much occupied decorating trees and hanging mistletoe for living children. As a parting thrust the Council hinted that the Mayor was too hidebound by tradition. If he reverenced the future instead of the past Hamelin's trade conditions might show improvement.

Next Christmas Eve, when his household was sleeping, old Carl let himself into the night. As his mother had done before him, he set out hobbling on his crutch in search of the Koppelberg Mountain. He never reached it. Where the road leaves the bridge for Koppelberg and the open country he was found next morning, sprawled in the snow with the loveliest doll he had ever fashioned beside him.

They gave the doll to his youngest granddaughter. Hamelin would miss him, but he had grown too childish to cope with the modern rush. After that the story of the Pied Piper and the old sadness, as so often happens with past griefs, became a legend.

But because of Carl, the lame boy, and his mother, the world has learned to believe that

little children are never really lost—nor, for that matter, anyone who has been loved by someone who remembers. On Christmas Eve they come back, even though we may not see them. They come hoping and expecting to find their stockings hanging beside the familiar fireplace. If they find them they know that they still are wanted—that they're kept alive by living people's loving. Which is probably the reason we hang up stockings and dream of Bethlehem; for as long as we have faith nothing ever dies.

WHEN FATHER CHRISTMAS WAS LATE

When Father Christmas Was Late

MAC'S daddy wasn't one bit like other daddies who lived on Mount Carmel Avenue. Mac had once heard a lady ask his mother, "Is it quite satisfactory to be married to a——" His mother had cut her short. "Perhaps not, but it's heaps more wonderful." Mac didn't know the exact meaning of *satisfactory,* but he agreed to the wonder of possessing his sort of daddy.

One great difference between his daddy and other daddies was that his didn't go to business. All the others on Mount Carmel Avenue

hurried off the moment breakfast was ended and didn't return even for lunch. His stayed at home all day long, almost as though he wasn't working, looking lazy and comfortable, his feet on a high cushion, a pen poised in his hand, and across the arms of his chair a board with a pad of paper. There he would sit in his gay room with its red lacquer furniture, to all appearances doing nothing. Most of the time he seemed to be glad to be interrupted, especially when Mac was the interrupter.

"Come in, Doo-doo," he would call. Mackie-Doodles, shortened to Doo-doo, being his pet name for the small person. "What shall we play at—lions in Africa?"

But there were other times when he sat scribbling all day and far into the night. When such misfortunes happened, there were no such games, no firelight stories. If a little boy scratched outside the study, pretending to be a little dog, there was no answer. If he muttered, "It's me, Daddy," an impatient voice would question, "What do you want, MacGregor?" If he dared to open the door unin-

vited he saw a stern man wreathed in smoke, a kind of wizard brewing an enchantment. Mummy on such occasions said that Daddy was inspired, which meant for Mac that he had to play alone, and that if he raised his voice the whole house from the kitchen to the attic would whisper, "Hush," for all the world as though every room were full of serpents. Mac supposed that such sicknesses were the reason for the lady's suggestion that his daddy was not satisfactory. But there were compensations. Inspirations did not last forever. The hour was always approaching when the study door would burst open and a jolly voice would be heard shouting, "I've finished. Where's Doo-doo?" Then what romps, what nonsense making! Hide-and-seek in dark passages! And before bedtime the most gorgeous stories. Half their gorgeousness was due to the fact that he was allowed to assist in the telling of them. When he didn't like the turn a story was taking, which was usually because it was becoming grown-up, all he had to do was to say, "Daddy, you know puffickly well it didn't hap-

pen one bit like that." Then, "Didn't it?" Daddy would inquire with a guilty air. Of course you must put him right, making it all up, while he nodded, pretending to remember. Sooner or later you grew tired and gave him permission to continue.

"I don't know how I could write anything," Daddy would poke fun to Nannie, "if it wasn't for my collaborator."

"Ees eet that he truly help you?" Nannie would ask delightedly, Nannie being French.

And Daddy would wag his head: "He really does." Which was an amazing compliment, since Mac's daddy was a novelist.

But all this is explanatory. A week ago an inspiration had seized Mac's daddy. Such an accident could not have befallen more awkwardly. Here it was the day before Christmas, and the inspiration had shown no signs of letting go of him. There were so many arrangements to be discussed—presents, decorations, the goat. The goat especially. It may have chanced before in this complicated world's history that little boys have set their hearts on

goats for Christmas. I don't know; but I do know that when Mac set his heart on anything he wanted it so persistently that he usually got it. For one thing he prayed about it. He'd been praying for a goat for months. It was to be a baby goat which he could feed on a bottle and for which, when it grew large enough, he could buy a cart and harness. He was to drive it along Mount Carmel Avenue, to the envy of less romantic little boys whose fathers were merely bank presidents or lawyers. His trouble was that he dared mention his desire to no one save Daddy. Other members of his family would say that goats were a nuisance; that, in any case, they weren't household pets. They might even say that Father Christmas never presented goats. Did Father Christmas ever bring them?—that was the question. He wanted to talk the matter over with someone who was sympathetic because, if Father Christmas did bring goats, a way had to be found at this late hour for informing him that one would be very welcome.

All day since early morning Mac had

watched the study door, hoping to see it open. Once he even fell asleep. Not till late afternoon, driven to desperation, did he muster courage to tap. As if by magic the door swung back and his father was stooping over him; "Why, you poor Doo-doo, you must have thought I'd forgotten you!"

"Had you?"

"Not for a second. I'd just scribbled the last word when I heard you scratching."

Lifting the little boy in his arms, he carried him to the high-backed chair and seated him on his knee before the glowing fire.

"I've disappointed you. How can I make atonement?"

"What's atonement?" Mac asked. "You do use long words, Daddy." His father ignored the question.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Doo-doo. I'll tell you a story—a tremendously exciting one."

"About a goat?" Mac coaxed, attempting tactfully to introduce the subject.

"A goat! Not that I'm aware; though it may be about anything by the time we've ended."

"Make it about a goat," Mac pleaded.

Daddy took the little hands which were caressing his face and held them closely. "The only story I can think of is about how once Santa Claus was almost late for Christmas."

Mac sat up thrilled.

"I remember. It was 'cause of the goat. It wiggled and was so difficult to carry."

Daddy puzzled for a minute, trying to guess what had suggested a goat to his small son. The most clever way to discover was to let him help invent the story.

"You may be right." He twirled his moustache, frowning ever so slightly. "But a goat wasn't my reason. As far as I've ever heard, the kind old Santa was tired out—the way our Mummy gets with doing so much for everyone. It was the night before Christmas; snow was falling in heaven. He lives in heaven, you know, in a little shining cottage. There was scarcely a sound, everything was so muffled. The younger angels were making slides on the golden pavements. The grown angels, who

usually pranced by in silver chariots, had put their chariots on runners and moved softly. Santa Claus had been busy for months, receiving messages about what the earth children wanted, tying up packages and writing labels, 'From Santa Claus with Christmas love.' And then he'd had his reindeer to attend to, grooming them to make them plump for the long journey. In fact, he'd done everything you can imagine so as not to waste a second in starting when the hour of midnight struck."

"Was it dark yet?" Mac questioned, glancing toward the windows where the wintry dusk had already gathered.

"It wasn't when Santa Claus sat down before his cheerful fire. But it was soon after. His chair was so comfortable and his room so quiet —nothing but the crackling of logs in the hearth, the rustling of snow against the panes, and the walls like a fairy tale with creeping shadows. He began to feel drowsy. The first few times the jerking of his head roused him. The last time he got up and put the kettle on the logs, so that he might make himself some-

thing hot before he started. Then he sat down again, intending to keep at least one eye open —and the dreadful thing happened."

Daddy paused dramatically.

"The dreadful thing was that he'd forgotten the goat," Mac invented.

"Much worse than that. He'd fallen asleep on the one night in the whole year when he ought to have kept awake in order to fill stockings."

"Someone woke him," Mac prompted.

"A good many people tried. Little angels who were allowed to be up late for Christmas came to his door and sang carols through the keyhole. Grown angels went by making their sleigh bells tinkle, 'Ding-a-dong, ding-a-dang.' He may have heard them in his dreams, but they didn't disturb him. The clock on his mantelpiece chimed the half hour, then the quarter, then midnight. At the same instant every church bell in heaven began to peal merrily. Twelve o'clock! Christmas had begun, and there sat Father Christmas snoring, the great lazy one."

"How wawful!" Mac whispered. "Everybody was waiting for him!"

"That was just it. That was what made it so awful. Think of all the little boys and girls who'd hung up their stockings and closed their eyes quickly in order that he might come. And there he sat sleeping, when the whole of heaven, big and little, knew he ought to have started."

"Didn't anybody live wiv him?" asked Mac anxiously.

"Only the cat. She did her best by purring against his trousers, 'Time to wake up, Father Christmas. Time to wake up.' But he only found her soothing. She jumped on his knees and began to use her claws, 'Time to wake up, Father Christmas. Time to wake up.' He yawned, brushed her aside, and closed his eyes. 'Ding-a-dong,' went the sleigh bells of the passing angels. The great lazy one!"

"The great lazy one!" Mac echoed.

"The poor old gentleman was tired," Daddy excused him.

"He was tired," Mac echoed. Then eagerly,

"I know what happened. I know zackly what happened."

"What did, Doo-doo? You always know everything."

"The goat butted him."

"You mean a reindeer."

"I don't. I mean a goat."

"There wasn't any goat."

"Didn't you say there was a goat, Daddy?" And when Daddy shook his head, wondering how on earth he could squeeze a goat into the story, "Tell it your own way, Daddy. The goat comes later, I 'xpect. It was a nawful pity Father Christmas was so tired, wasn't it?"

"That was what the cottage thought," Daddy continued. "It creaked its boards and rattled its shutters, 'Wake up, Father Christmas—time to wake up.' The kettle thought so too; it sang its loudest, blowing steam into his face in great cloudy puffs. Nothing made any difference. There he sat as though it were a night in July, his hands folded in his beard, snoring and snoring."

"I fink Jesus had to wake him," Mac smiled

triumphantly, quite certain he had guessed the solution.

Daddy smoothed his lips against the silky head, pondering the suggestion.

"Jesus was with his mother," he said at last, "being born again in Bethlehem. No, I don't think Jesus woke him."

"Then who did?"

"The reindeer. They live just back of his cottage. They knew, though he'd forgotten, that they ought to have started, so they began to kick their stalls, making a thumping noise like thunder. 'My goodness! What's that?' Father Christmas sat up. He rubbed his eyes and saw the kettle puffing. Then he saw the cat arching her back and scolding. He heard the cottage creaking and rattling. 'My goodness!' he exclaimed. 'What's happening?' Outside the sleigh bells of the passing angels tinkled, 'Ding-a-dong. Ding-a-dang.' The whole sky was rocking with chimes, 'Tralalala-tralalala.' He glanced at the clock and bounded from his chair. 'It's Christmas'—he gave a great laugh—'and I haven't started.' "

"Why did he laugh, Daddy?"

"Because he always laughs. He's the most laughy person. He just can't help it. Having slipped into his big red coat with all the white fur on it, he lit his lantern and flung wide the door to go to the stables, and what do you think he saw?"

"A goat," Mac whispered.

"He saw all heaven white and twinkling, and his reindeer standing in the street already harnessed to the big sledge piled high with Christmas presents."

"But you said he'd heard the reindeer kicking in their stalls."

"So he had, but while he'd been putting on his coat the angels had made haste and harnessed them."

"Hadn't they been awful quick, Daddy?"

"I should say they had. They were afraid that unless they helped him he'd never get round to all those stockings. They couldn't bear to think that a single stocking should be empty on Christmas morning. The moment they saw him, they all began to urge him,

'Hurry, Father Christmas. Hurry.' They pushed him up on the sacks of Christmas toys, and one of them ran back into the cottage to fetch his whip—he'd forgotten that. The reindeer glanced round, impatient to be off, tossing their graceful heads. 'Hurry, Father Christmas. Hurry,' the bells chimed in the church steeples. He gave his big laugh. 'I'll be there on time,' he promised, though in his heart he wasn't by any means certain. At the crack of his whip the reindeer leapt forward; they knew the road without his guiding—the long bare road, slippery as glass, that winds down to earth in big curves through the stars. From the walls of heaven the big and little angels watched him, till he grew so distant they could scarcely follow him. And then, because the suspense was ended, they remembered they were sleepy and, rubbing their eyes, crept away to bed. Father Christmas was almost an hour late, but, at any rate, he'd started."

"Did he reach the earth?" Mac asked breathlessly.

"He reached the earth all right, Doo-doo."

"Did he have time enough to visit all the stockings?"

"That's what I'm coming to. He kept consulting his watch and cracking his whip and shouting to his reindeer to go faster. The road had never seemed to him so long. He kept calculating how he could possibly make all his visits. 'It depends on the state of the chimneys,' he murmured. 'If they've all been swept clean perhaps I can just manage it. I've got to be back before the dawn.' "

"But has he, Daddy?"

"Why, certainly. If he wasn't, little boys and girls would be awake in their beds and would see him."

"That would be nawful. I hope he came to our chimley first."

"He didn't. That was what was worrying him. Our chimney was the last on his list. He had to visit all the other little boys and girls on Mount Carmel Avenue. 'I wonder whether I'll have time,' he kept muttering, 'to call at Mackie-Doodle's house.' "

"And he did?" Mac implored.

"He did," Daddy relieved the uncertainty, "but you're making me tell the last part first. I'd intended to tell you how he saw all the snow-covered roofs of the earth spreading far below him; and how he visited Europe and Asia and Australia, so that he had barely an hour left for the whole of America, including Canada."

"I don't care about 'Merica including Canada, Daddy. I only care about how he came to Mackie-Doodle's house."

"Well, here's how he came—at a gallop, with his beard all covered with icicles. He'd been to Jackie Barker's farther down the street, and he'd been to Susie Brown's. In fact, he'd been to all Mac's little friends. Mac's stocking was absolutely the last he had to fill before he climbed back to heaven. He galloped on to Mac's roof and tied up his reindeer to Mac's chimney. Then he glanced round at the sky; it was growing paler. 'I oughtn't,' he thought; 'but Mac's chimney's always clean. I believe I've just time to manage it.' The rein-

deer didn't think he had; they stamped and snorted. That was why he tied them, for fear they would start back to heaven without him."

"I wish they had," Mac chuckled; "it would be fun to have Santa for Christmas."

"For Christmas!" Daddy looked shocked. "There would never be another proper Christmas, because he'd never be able to get back to heaven to reload his sledge. He'd forget that he'd ever been Father Christmas and just become a sort of old grandfather."

"Then I don't wish it." Mac changed his mind. "But I do wish you'd be quicker, Daddy, 'cause in a minute Nannie'll be fetching me for my baff."

Sure enough there was Nannie at the door, tapping: "Monsieur Mac."

"Come in," Daddy called. "We're just finishing a story. It won't take a second."

Nannie entered—the good French Nannie.

"Sit down, Nannie," Daddy invited. Then to Mac, "Where were we? Oh, yes, Father Christmas had tied his reindeer to Mac's chimney, and he hadn't a second to spare if he was

to get back to heaven before the dawn. Of course, seeing that it was nearly daylight, he was terribly afraid Mac might see him."

"Did I see him, Daddy?"

"You'll find out if you listen. Picking up his last sack, which was labelled, 'Mac, with Christmas love from Santa,' he pulled his coat more tightly about him and began to descend the chimney. Halfway down he stopped."

"I know why: the goat bleated."

"But there wasn't a goat, Doodles. You've been talking about a goat all evening. He stopped because he'd stuck."

"How stuck, Daddy?"

"Well, now, how can I tell that? Either Father Christmas had become fatter or the chimney had become narrower. I suppose the real reason was that he'd been in too much of a hurry. He tried to climb back and couldn't. He tried to climb lower and he could just a little. In fact, he managed to get so low that one foot was just showing in the fireplace of Mackie's bedroom. After that he couldn't budge and dared not wake Mackie."

"But he *had* waked me." Mac seized the telling of the story. "I'd heard the prancing of the reindeer on the roof when he landed. I'd knowed that it was Father Christmas at once. I'd shut my eyes very close so he might fink I was asleep. But when he took so very long in coming down the chimley I knowed he must be stuck. So I opened my eyes and raised myself on my pillow, and there I saw his foots hanging in the fireplace. Nannie hadn't heard nuffing. She never does. So I hopped out of bed and I whispered up the chimley, 'Father Christmas, it's only Mackie. Can I help you?' And Father Christmas said, 'I'm late, Mackie. Got to get back to heaven before daybreak. Catch hold of my foots and pull 'em just as if you was going to pull 'em off.' So I pulled and pulled—until he fell into my bedroom wiv a bump. 'Gosh! I'm winded, Mackie,' he said."

It was Daddy's turn to interrupt. "Father Christmas never says *gosh*. And little boys aren't allowed to."

"P'r'aps he didn't." Mac sucked his thumb

and looked repentant. Then he glanced up slyly. "It sounded like *gosh,* Daddy. It did really. Anyway, he was turribly happy, 'cause I'd pulled him. 'Here's your presents,' he said, 'old son.' And I said, 'Thanks nawfully.' Then he said, 'If it hadn't been for you, Mackie, someone might have lit a fire in that chimley and I'd have been all burnt up.' And I said, 'They would have to-morrer. But won't you undo that sack and let me see what you've brought?' So he undid the sack, and I s'pose he must have seen I was disappointed, for he said, 'Haven't I broughted you the toys you wanted?' And I said, 'Some of 'em.' And he said, 'What isn't there?' And I said, 'The goat.' And he said, 'What goat?' And I said, 'The little baby one that you can keep in your cellar or maybe in your baffroom and feed wiv a bottle.' And he said, 'Gosh,' or p'r'aps he said, 'My goodness, nobody told me. But you pulled me down the chimley, so I'll see you get one. It's nearly daylight. I must be off.' So we shook hands and I said, 'You promise?' And he said, 'If I can't find a baby goat, I'll send a baby

reindeer.' So I pushed him back up the chimley, which was quite easy wivout the sack, and when I'd heard him start, I crept into bed and went to sleep. When I woke in the morning what do you fink I found?"

"That you'd dreamed everything," Daddy suggested.

Mac turned to his Nannie.

"What do you fink, Nannie?"

"A leetle dog, Monsieur Mac."

Again the obstinate shake of the head. They guessed and guessed: soldiers, a rocking-horse, a golden cage with a canary. While they were guessing Mummy entered.

"The bath's getting cold. It's time my littlest lover was in bed."

"But guess, Mummy," Mac appealed to her. "What did Santa Claus bring me for pulling him out of the chimley when he got stuck?"

Mummy glanced at Daddy. "You've been exciting him with one of your stories. Come to your bath, Doo-doo. The little brain needs resting."

She had picked him up and had reached the doorway, when he called back across her shoulder, "It was a goat, Daddy. A little baby goat what you can feed wiv a bottle."

Later, when his stockings had been hung up and he knelt by his bed, Nannie kneeling beside him, Daddy and Mummy standing reverently in the background, he prayed the French prayer Nannie had taught him: *"Guardian angel, watch over me till I awake. While I sleep, take thou my hand lest I fall en route. Good-night, little angel, till to-morrow."* After a thoughtful silence, he added in English, *"And please God, make Father Christmas bring me the baby goat."*

"What's all this about a goat?" Daddy turned to Mummy when they were out of earshot and the door had shut.

"Well, what is it?" she asked teasingly. "You ought to know. Wasn't there a goat in your story?"

"There certainly was not." Daddy cleared himself. He was always getting into hot water for the nonsense he invented.

Mummy thought. "I believe I know where he got the idea—from Nannie. She's been telling him what she did when she was a little girl on her grandmother's farm at Dax."

"I suppose it's too late to buy a goat now?" Daddy suggested doubtfully, hoping to be given permission to set out that instant in search of one.

"What could we do with a goat in a city?" Mummy asked sensibly.

"What could we?" Daddy echoed, pretending that he was sensible. "All the same, the little lad will be disappointed."

"He won't remember that he ever thought of a goat when he sees all his other presents," Mummy said cheerfully. Then, noticing Daddy's crestfallen expression, "Why, I do believe if I encouraged you, you would try to find one. You are a spoiling daddy."

There were heaps of things to do after dinner. The most important was the Christmas tree, which had yet to be set up. In former years Nannie had always taken a hand in helping. But this year, the moment dinner was ended,

she appeared on the threshold all dressed for going out.

"I forgotted somefing," she apologized, "if Madame will excuse me."

And with that Nannie was gone. She didn't return till late. Daddy and Mummy were in the study where, according to immemorial custom, all the important toys were arranged before the fireplace, only the smaller gifts being placed at the end of Mac's bed in his stocking. Nannie was slipping by the study door, going on tiptoe to avoid attention, when Mummy heard her.

"That you, Nannie?" she called. "Come and tell us whether you approve of how we've arranged Mac's presents."

But Nannie passed on, as though she'd been guilty of a crime. When Mummy called again she fled. The next sound was of a door shutting and the lock turning.

"That's funny." Mummy was puzzled. "She's never done that before, going out on Christmas Eve and then locking herself in Mac's bedroom."

"Everyone's funny on Christmas Eve." Daddy smiled. "Keeping secrets makes one funny."

The last thing they did was to place a glass of milk and a cigar on the hearth for Father Christmas. That was Mac's idea. They did it every year so as to make Father Christmas feel that they were grateful.

Daddy didn't sleep with quite his usual readiness. He reproached himself with having been selfish; he oughtn't to have stayed hidden away from his little boy, working and working till the very last moment. He began to go over his story; what a terrible catastrophe it would be if Santa Claus did arrive late! He began to think about the goat. It was quite absurd that Doo-doo should have set his heart on a goat. But then little boys are absurd; they can't help it. Of course he saw now with accusing clearness what his own little boy had been trying to tell him: that unless he received a goat, Christmas wouldn't be Christmas; and if Christmas wasn't to be Christmas, it would be just the same as if Santa Claus had never

started. How on earth to remedy the error? He could go first thing to-morrow morning to Silver Lake, the Italian quarter, where there were baby goats in plenty. But that wouldn't be the same as finding a baby goat in a basket inside the hearth, which Santa Claus had brought by reindeer express straight down the chimney. Well, it was too late now. He didn't do any good by lying awake and feeling sorry. Nannie had felt sorry. That was why she hadn't helped with the Christmas tree, very probably. So at last he fell asleep to dream the story he had invented; only, in his dream, Santa Claus started so late that after filling stockings in Europe, Asia, and Australia, he had no time to visit America, including Canada.

He awoke to a white, shining morning. Snow had fallen. His first thought was of Mac. And there was Mac prancing in pajamas in the middle of the bedroom floor. It was the sound of prancing that had awakened him. Mummy was rousing. "Happy Christmas, my darlings," she was saying drowsily and raising herself

from the pillow. Then she sat bolt upright, staring. Daddy copied her example and shot bolt upright, too. In the splash of sunlight their little boy was dancing and shouting, "I've got it. I've got it. A goat. A baby goat."

And sure enough he had, a baby goat without horns, which was trying to wriggle from his arms, no bigger than a fox terrier.

"But how?" Mummy gasped.

"Father Christmas. He left it in my baffroom. Oh, do say I can have it!"

It was afterward in the study, where the larger presents were arranged, that Mummy encountered the guilty, almost tearful Nannie.

"My leetle boy, he pray for it. I tell him I haf one when I was leetle. So," she sank her head with pretended meekness, knowing she was forgiven, "I go out last night to the Italian quarter.

"It hurt me here," she pressed her heart, "if Father Christmas start late and my leetle boy be disappointed."

THE LITTLE HOUSE

The Little House

I

IF THE little house, tell this story. It was lived within my walls; not a line is invented, and it was I, by my interfering, who brought about the happy ending. Who wants a story that does not end happily, especially a Christmas story? To have been responsible for the happy ending is pretty nearly as clever as to have made the story up out of one's own head or, as we houses say, out of one's own walls.

Perhaps you never heard before of a house

telling a story. If that be so, it is because you don't listen or because you go to bed too early. Unlike people, we houses sleep all day long; but after midnight we wake up and talk. When the clock strikes twelve, our stairs begin to crack and our windows to rattle and our floors to creak. If you ever hear these sounds, don't be frightened; they simply mean that the kind old walls that shelter you have begun to remember and to think. And we have so many things to remember and to think about, especially we old houses who have been standing for almost two hundred years. We have seen so much; we have been the friends of so many generations. More little children have been born beneath our roofs than we have stairs on which to count. We reckon things on our stairs, just as people reckon things on their fingers. When our stairs crack after midnight it's usually because we're counting the births and love makings and marriages we have watched. We very often get them wrong because there are so many of them. Then the doors and windows and floors will chip in to correct us. "Ha," a

window will rattle, "you've forgotten the little girl who used to gaze through my panes in 1760 or thereabouts." One of the doors will swing slowly on its hinges and, if anyone disputes with it, will bang, shouting angrily, "Wrong again—all wrong." Then the walls and the windows and the doors and the floors all start whispering, trying to add up correctly the joys and sorrows they have witnessed in the years beyond recall. When that happens, if you're awake and listening, you'll hear us start adding afresh, from the lowest to the topmost stair.

I am a London house and a very little house, standing in a fashionable square near Hyde Park. I have known my ups and downs. Once was the time when I was almost in the country and the linkboys used to make a fuss at having to escort my lady so far in her sedan chair. It's a long way to the country now, for the city has spread out miles beyond me. Within sight through the trees at the end of the square red motor busses pass, bumping their way rowdily down to Hammersmith and Kew. In my

young days these places were villages, but I am told they are full of noises now. I have at least escaped that, for our square is a backwater of quiet and leads to nowhere, having an entrance only at one end. All the houses in the square were built at the same time as I was, which makes things companionable. We all look very much alike, with tiny areas, three stone steps leading up from the pavement, one window blinking out from the ground floor, two blinking out from each of the other floors, and a veranda running straight across us. In summer time the veranda is gay with flowers. Our only difference is the colour we are painted, especially the colour of our doors. Mine is white; but some of our neighbours' are blue, some green, some red. We're very proud of the front doors in our square. In the middle stands a railed-in garden, to which none but our owners have access. Its trees are as ancient as ourselves. Behind us, so hidden that it is almost forgotten, stands the gray parish church, surrounded by a grave-

yard in which many of the people who have been merry in us rest.

For some years we were what is known as a "gone down neighbourhood," till a gentleman who writes books bought us cheap, put us in repair, and rented us to his friends. This has made us very select; since then we have again become fashionable.

Now you know all that is necessary to form a mental picture of us. Because we are so small, we are sometimes spoken of as "Dolls' House Square." All the things that I shall tell you I do not pretend to have witnessed, for houses have to spend their lives always in the one place—they cannot ride in taxis and move about. We gain our knowledge of how the world is changing by listening to the conversations of people who inhabit us; when night has fallen we mutter among ourselves, passing on to one another beneath the starlight down the lamplit streets the gossip we have overheard. Whatever of importance we miss the church bells tell us. Big Ben, with his sweet

tenor voice, booming out the hours, is in this respect particularly thoughtful.

So now, having explained myself, I come to my story of the little lady who needed to be loved but did not know it, and the wounded officer who wanted rest.

II

The little lady who needed to be loved but did not know it discovered me quite by accident. This story is a series of accidents; if it had not been for the *if's* and the *perhaps's* and the *possibilities* there wouldn't have been any story to tell.

I was empty when she found me, for my late tenants had grown frightened and had moved into the country on account of air raids. They said that I was too near the giant searchlights and anti-aircraft guns of Hyde Park Corner to be healthy. If they weren't killed by bombs, sooner or later they would be struck by our own expended shell cases that came toppling from two miles out of the clouds. So they had made their exit hurriedly in

November, taking all their furniture and leaving me to spend my one-hundred-and-ninety-eighth Christmas in the company of a caretaker.

It was shortly before Christmas when I first saw her. Night had settled peacefully down; it was about nine o'clock when the maroons and sirens began to give warning that the enemy was approaching. In an instant, like a lamp extinguished, the lights of London flickered and sank. Down the forests of streets innumerable doors swiftly opened, and people came pattering out. Dragging half-clad children by the hand and carrying babies snatched up from their warm beds, they commenced to run hither and thither, seeking the faint red lights of shelters, where cellars and overhead protection might be found. Policemen, mounted on bicycles, rode up and down the thoroughfares, blowing whistles. Ambulances dashed by, tooting horns and clanging bells. From far and near out of the swamp of darkness rose a medley of panic and sound. Prodding the sky, like detectives with lanterns,

searchlights hunted and turned back the edges of the clouds. Then ominously, with solemn anger, the guns opened up and in fierce defiance the first bomb fell. The pattering of feet ceased suddenly. Streets grew forlorn and empty. The commotion of living and the terror of dying were transferred from the earth to the air.

I was standing deserted with my door wide open, for at the first signs of clamour the old woman, who was supposed to take care of me, had hobbled up from her basement and out onto the pavement in search of the nearest Tube Station. In her fear for her safety she had forgotten to close my door, so there I stood with the damp air drifting into my hall, at the mercy of any chance vagrant.

The guns had been booming for perhaps five minutes when I heard running footsteps entering the square. Our square is so shut in and small that it echoes like a church; every sound is startling and can be heard in every part of it. I could not see to whom the footsteps belonged on account of the trees and the

darkness. They entered on the side farthest from me, from the street where the red motor busses pass. When they had reached the top, from which there is no exit, they hesitated; then came hurrying back along the side on which they would have to pass me. *Tip-a-tap, tip-a-tap, tip-a-tap* and the panting breath—the sound of a woman's high-heeled shoes against the pavement. Accompanying the *tip-a-tap* were funny, more frequent, shuffling noises, indistinct and confused. Three shadows grew out of the gloom, a small one on either side and a bigger one in the centre; as they drew near they resolved themselves into a lady in an evening wrap and two children.

I was more glad than I cared to own, for I'd been feeling lonely. Now that peace has come and we've won the war I don't mind acknowledging that I'd been feeling frightened; at the time I wouldn't have confessed it for the world lest the Huns should have got to know it. We London houses, trying to live up to the example of our soldiers, always pretended that we liked the excitement of air

raids. We didn't really; we quaked in all our bricks and mortar. One's foundations aren't what they were when one is a hundred-and-ninety-eight years old. So I'm not ashamed to tell you that I was delighted when the lady and her children came in my direction. I tried to push my front door wider, that they might guess that they were welcome. I was terribly nervous that they might pass in their haste without seeing that I was anxious to give them shelter. It was shelter that they were looking for. In coming into the square they had been seeking a short cut home.

They drew level without slackening their steps and had almost gone by me when, less than a quarter of a mile away, a bomb crashed deafeningly. Everything seemed to reel. Far and near you could hear the tinkling of splintered glass. The world leapt up red for a handful of seconds as though the door of a gigantic furnace had been flung open. Against the glow you could see the crouching roofs of houses, the crooked chimney pots, and the network of trees in the garden with their branches

stripped and bare. The lady clutched at my railings to steady herself. Her face was white, and her eyes were dark with terror. The last bomb had been so very close that it seemed as though the next must fall in the square itself. One of the searchlights had spotted the enemy and was following his plane through the clouds, holding it in its glare.

"Mummy, it's all right. Don't be frightened. You've got me to take care of you." It was the little boy speaking. Then he saw my *TO LET* sign above and pointed, "We'll go in here till it's over. Look, the door's wide open."

He tugged on her hand. With her arm about the shoulder of the little girl on the other side of her, she followed. The glow died down and faded. Soon the square was as secret and shadowy as it had been before—a tank full of darkness in which nothing stirred.

III

Never since I had been built had any visit quite as unceremonious as this occurred. Who was the strange lady? What was she doing

wandering the streets at this hour unescorted? She was beautiful and richly gowned; her face was young but very sad. I was anxious to learn more, so I listened intently.

At first, on entering, they halted just across the threshold, huddled together, the little lady with an arm flung about each of the children. She seemed to think that someone might be hidden in the darkness watching—someone to whom I belonged—for presently she addressed that supposed someone tremblingly: "We hope you don't mind, but the car forgot to come for us. Grandfather had been giving us a party. When we heard the warning we tried to run home before the raid started; but we got lost. The Tube Stations were all so crowded that . . . And we found your door open, so we hope you don't mind us entering."

She paused nervously, waiting for someone to answer. A board creaked; apart from that the silence was unbroken.

Speaking to herself more than to the children, "It's quite empty," she said at last.

"Shall I close the door, Mumsie?" the little boy questioned.

"No, Robbie darling," she whispered; "they might be angry when they come back. I mean the people who live here."

"But it's dreadfully cold."

"Then let's go farther in and find somewhere to sit down till the raid is over."

They stumbled their way in the darkness through the hall and up the narrow staircase, where only one can walk abreast. Robbie went first on this voyage of discovery; he felt that if anything were hiding from them, his body would form a protection. His mother didn't want to lose sight of the street by climbing higher, but he coaxed her on from stair to stair. As pioneer of the expedition, he reached the tiny landing with the single door, which gives entrance to the drawing room which occupies the whole of the second story. Turning the handle, he peeped in warily. Then, "Cheer up, Mummy," he cried, "there's been a fire and there's a wee bit of it still burning."

The room was carpetless and bare of furniture, save for an old sofa with sagging springs that had been pulled up across the hearth. Perched on the bars of the grate sat a tin kettle, gasping feebly, with nearly all its water boiled away. Under the kettle a few coals glowed faintly and a weak flame jumped and sank, like a ghost trying to make up its mind to vanish. Through the tall French windows that opened onto the veranda one could see the sky lit up with the tumultuous display of monstrous fireworks. From high overhead, above the clatter of destruction and the banging of guns, came the long-drawn, contented humming of the planes.

"They're right over us," the little boy whispered.

As if afraid that any movement on their part would draw the enemy's attention they stood silent, clinging together, and listened. Oblongs of light, falling through the windows, danced and shifted. Once the beam of a searchlight, groping through the shadows, gazed straight in and dwelt on them astounded, as

if to say, "Well, I never! Who'd have thought to find you here?"

They tiptoed over to the couch and sat down, making as little noise as possible, for they still weren't sure that they were welcome. They didn't speak or move for some time; with the excitement and running and losing their way they were very tired. Presently the little boy got up, and went and stood by the window looking out, with his legs astraddle and his hands behind his back like a man. He wore a sailor suit and had bare, sturdy knees. He was very small to try to be so manly.

"I'm not frightened, Mummy," he said. "If Father were here, he wouldn't be frightened."

She shifted her position so that she could glance proudly back at him. "Father was never frightened."

For the first time the little girl spoke. "If Father were here they wouldn't dare to come to London. I expect they knew——"

"Yes, Joan," her mother interrupted quickly, "I expect they knew——"

"And when I'm a man they won't dare to

come to London, either," said Robbie. "How many of them did Father . . . ?"

But at that moment, before he could finish his question, his mother pressed her finger against his lips warningly. Above the roar of what was going on in the clouds she had heard another and more alarming sound: the front door closed quietly, a match was struck, and then came the slow deliberate tread of someone groping up the stairs.

IV

The tread reached the landing and proceeded to mount higher. Then it hesitated. Another match was struck, and it commenced to descend. On arriving at the landing again, it halted, uncertain. The handle of the door was tried. The door swung open, and a man peered across the threshold. No one spoke. The little lady on the couch drew Joan closer to her side and held her breath, hoping that the man might not observe them and that, when he had gone, they might escape. But the man

did not go, he stood there on the alert, listening and searching the darkness.

It was Robbie who spoke first. He had thrust his hands deep into his knickerbocker pockets to gain courage. "What do you want? We think you might speak," he said.

The man laughed pleasantly. "I'm sorry if I've frightened you. I didn't know that anyone was here. I thought this was an empty house. Perhaps you weren't aware of it, but you'd left your front door open." Then, because no one replied, he added, "It's all right now; it's closed."

He wasn't looking at Robbie any longer. He was trying to probe the shadows by the fireplace, where he had caught the rustle of a woman's dress. He had caught something else —the faint sweet fragrance of Jacqueminot.

"I've alarmed you," he said. "I'm a stranger in London, and I couldn't find any way out of your square. I strayed into your house for shelter. I'm sorry I intruded. Good-night to you all, however many there are of you."

He was actually going. It was impossible to see what he looked like, but he was evidently well mannered and a gentleman. Suddenly, to the lady in the lonely house, from being a creature of dread, he became a heaven-sent protector. Who could tell how many less desirable visitors might not call before the raid was ended? The caretaker might return. Were that to happen, it would be much more comfortable to have this male trespasser present to help make the explanations. Just as he was withdrawing the lady rose from the shabby couch and called him back.

"Oh, please, we'd much rather you didn't go."

"But who are *we?*"

"I and Robbie and Joan. We did the same thing as you. The house doesn't belong to us. We got caught, just as you did. We were terribly scared and—and it's creepy being in an empty, strange house where you haven't any right to be."

Though she could only see the blur of him, she could feel the smile that was in his eyes

when she had finished her appeal. And it was an appeal, eager and nervous and tremulous. The tears in her voice said much more than the words. As he turned on his heel she heard the jingle of his spurs and guessed that he was a man in khaki.

"I'm on my way to France," he said, speaking slowly; "I only landed yesterday. I was lonely too; I didn't know a soul. A queer way to make a friend!"

As he stepped into the room the light from the windows fell on him; he was dressed in the uniform of an American officer.

"Which are *you?*" he asked. "I've heard only your voice as yet. I'll do anything I can to help."

The little lady held out her hand, but her face was still in shadow. It was a very tiny hand. "It's good of you to be willing to stay with us," she said gratefully.

At that point their conversation languished. The circumstances were so unprecedented that they were at a loss what to say or how to act. It was he who broke the awkward silence:

"We ought to be able to rouse this fire with a little effort." He bent over it, trying to pull it together. "We need more coal. If you'll excuse me and won't be frightened while I'm gone, I'll run down and see what I can forage."

It seemed a long time that he was gone—so long that she had begun to be afraid that he'd taken his chance to slip out. She wouldn't have blamed him. In the last two years, since she'd been by herself, she'd become used to men doing things like that. She had ceased to bank overmuch on masculine chivalry. Few men had leisure to expend on a woman, however charming and beautiful, whose children had always to be included in the friendship.

When she had made quite sure that he was no more chivalrous than other men she heard him laboriously returning. He came in carrying a scuttle in one hand and some bundles of wood in the other. "And now we'll pull down the blinds," he said "and make a blaze and get her going."

On his knees before the hearth he started to work, ramming paper between the bars, piling

sticks criss-cross and using his cheeks as bellows. In the intervals between his exertions he chatted, "I'm no great shakes at housework. You mustn't watch me too closely or laugh at me. I'll do better than this when I've been at the Front, I guess. Are these your kiddies? . . . I suppose your husband's over there, where I'm going?"

"He was."

"Oh, so you've got him back! You're lucky. Is he wounded or has he got a staff job in England?"

"He'll never come back."

He paused in what he was doing and sat gazing into the flames which were licking at the wood. He hung his head. He ought to have thought of that: in the last few years so many Englishmen were dead. And then there came another reflection—the picture of what it must have cost her husband to say good-bye to his wife and children and go marching away to anonymous glory. He wasn't married himself, but if he had been . . . It took enough bolstering up of one's courage to go when one was

single; but to go when one was married . . . And yet selfishly, ever since he had put on khaki, his paramount regret had been that, were he to peg out, he would leave no one to carry on in his stead. This air raid was his first remote taste of warfare; within the next few weeks he was to know it in its full fury. What had impressed him most was the difference between war as imagined and as witnessed. As imagined it had seemed the most immense of sports; as witnessed it was merely murder. Just before he had sought shelter he had seen where a bomb had fallen. People had been killed—people not so different from the mother and children hiding in this house. The suddenness of extinction had made him feel that in the game of life he had somehow "missed out." There would be no woman to think of him as "her man" were he to go West. And here was the woman's price for such caring: "He'll never come back."

He turned his head slowly; by the light of the crackling wood for the first time he saw her. The little boy was lying, wearied out,

with his head bowed in her lap. The little girl sat drowsing against her shoulder. She herself was leaning forward, gazing at and beyond him with a curious air of resigned intensity. She seemed to him to be listening for someone whom she knew in her heart was never coming. He noticed the white half moon of her shoulders faintly showing beneath her chinchilla wrap. He noticed her string of perfect pearls, the single ring on her hand, and the expensive simplicity of her velvet gown. He was sufficiently a man of the world to make a guess at her social station. But it wasn't her beauty or elegance that struck him, though they were strangely in contrast to the empty room in which she sat; it was her gentleness and expression of patient courage. He knew, as surely as if she had told him, that this empty room, in which he had found her, was the symbol of her days. It was with her as it was with himself: there was no man to whom she was "his woman."

"I've hurt you by the impertinence of my questions."

She smiled and shook her head. "You've not hurt me. Don't think that. I shouldn't like you to think that you'd hurt me or anything that would make you sad. Are you going to France soon?"

"To-morrow."

"Then you won't be here for Christmas. I wonder where you'll spend it. Perhaps next Christmas the war will be ended and you'll——" She caught the instant change in his expression. She had seen that look too often in soldiers' eyes when the future was mentioned not to know what it meant. She laid her hand on his arm impulsively. "But everyone who goes doesn't stay there. You'll be one of the lucky ones. You'll come back. I have that feeling about you. I know what's in your mind: you're a long way from home, you're going to face a great danger, and you believe that everything is ended. You can only think of war now, but there are so many better things to do with life than fighting. All the better things will be here to welcome you when you return."

He found himself talking to her in a way in which he had never spoken to any woman. Afterward, when he recalled their conversation, he wondered why. Was it because she had filled him with so complete a sense of rest? One didn't have to explain things to her; she understood. He asked her how it was that she understood, and she replied, "You don't have to go to war to learn how to endure. You can stay at home and yet beat off attacks in the front-line trench. We women defeat despair by keeping on smiling when there's nothing left to smile about, and by wearing pretty dresses when there's no one to take a pride in what we wear."

He retorted unguardedly, as he felt! "But there must be heaps of people who take a pride in you."

"You think so? You're unspoilt and generous. Life's a wonderful dream that lies all before you. You haven't known sorrow. Do you know what you seemed to be saying when you spoke to me through the shadows? 'Everybody has always loved and trusted me, so you

love and trust me, too.' If it hadn't been for that, that I saw that you'd always been loved and were lonely for the moment, I shouldn't have sat here talking with you for the last hour. You'll get everything you want from life if you'll only wait for it. You'll come back."

While he sat at her feet in the firelight she had the knack of making him feel like a little boy who was being comforted. She kept aloof from him, but she mothered him with words. He found himself glancing up at her furtively to make sure that she wasn't old at all—not a single day older than himself. He turned over in his mind what she had said about having no one to be proud of her. He would have given a lot for the chance to be proud of her himself. But he was going to France to-morrow—there was no time left for that. With so much fighting and dying to be done it seemed as though there would never again be time for anything that was personal.

The clamour in the skies had died down. The crash of guns had been growing infrequent; now it had subsided. The drone of

planes could be no more heard. The invader had been driven back; hard on his heels our aërial cavalry were following across the Channel, awaiting their moment to exact revenge when he tried to land.

The restored normality seemed to rouse her reserve. Lifting the sleeping head from her lap, she whispered, "Wake up, Robbie; we can go home now. It's all over."

The officer had risen and stood leaning against the mantel. "So it's good-bye?"

"I'm afraid so."

"You've made me happy when I least expected to be happy. Shall we meet again, I wonder?"

She smiled at his seriousness. "Perhaps. One never knows what the good God will allow. We didn't expect to meet to-night."

He was sensitive to her evasion and laughed, pretending to make light of it. "We don't want them to think they've had burglars. We had better leave something for the coals we've burned." He placed a pound note on the mantel.

Taking Joan in his arms and going first, he led the way down the stairs. When they were out of the hall and the front door had closed behind them he left the little group on the steps and went in search of a taxi. After a lengthy expedition he found one and, by promising an excessive fare, induced the driver to accompany him back. He knew neither the name of the square nor the number of the house, so he had to keep his head out of the window and shout directions. On entering the square he searched the pavement ahead, but could catch no sign of his recent companions. He halted the cab against the curb at the point where he thought he had left them; he was made certain that it was the point when he saw the notice *TO LET*. Perhaps the caretaker had come back and invited them to enter till he returned. He rang the bell and knocked vigorously. The driver was eyeing him with suspicion. When his repeated knockings were unanswered he got into the taxi and ordered him to move slowly round the square.

She had completely vanished. Either she

had picked up a conveyance for herself while he had been engaged in his search, or else she had lost faith in him and had taken it for granted that he had deserted her. He did not know her name. She had given him no address. To-morrow night he would be in France. He had neither the time nor the necessary information to hunt for her.

In reply to the driver's request for further instructions, he growled the name of his hotel. Then he spread himself out on the cushions and gave way to disconsolate reflections. The night was full of smoke and heavy with the smell of a bonfire burnt out. Things had become again uninteresting. He told himself that the most wonderful hour of his life was ended.

V

Christmas came and went unmerrily. The old woman who took care of me had known better days; she stayed in bed in an effort to forget. Next door but one, a son had returned unexpectedly from the trenches. There were laughing, dancing, and piano playing. I tried

to share their happiness; but happiness isn't the same when it is borrowed second hand. My rooms were cheerless and empty of all sound.

I kept thinking of my air-raid visitors, wondering where they were and hoping that the American officer had refound the little lady. If he had I felt sure he would be good to her. I told myself a foolish fairy story, as old houses will, of how, when the war was ended, they would drive up to my door together as if by accident and exclaim, "Why, it's the little house where we first met!" Then the *TO LET* sign would be taken down and, having fetched Joan and Robbie, we would all live together forever. With luck and love we might have smaller feet to toddle up and down my stairs.

January, February, March commenced and ended, and the *TO LET* sign was still there. It seemed that nobody would ever want me. It was April now; to their nests in the railed-in garden of the square the last year's birds were coming back. Trees had become a mist of greenness. Tulips and daffodils were shin-

ing above the ground. In the window boxes of other houses geraniums were making a scarlet flare. Without warning the dream, which had been no more than a dream, began to become a fact.

I had been drowsing in the sun, taking no notice of what was happening, when I was suddenly awakened by a sharp rat-a-tat-tat. I came to myself with a start to find that the little lady, unaccompanied, was standing on my steps.

She knocked again and then a third time. There could be no doubt about her determination to enter. At last the old woman heard her and dragged herself complainingly up from the basement. When the door had been narrowly opened, the little lady pushed it wider and stepped smartly into the hall with an exceedingly businesslike air. "I have an order from the agents to view the house."

"I'm 'ard of 'earing. Wot did yer say? Speak louder."

"I have an order from the agents to look over the house."

"Let's see your order."

While the caretaker fumbled for her spectacles she went on talking. "You won't like it. There's no real sense in your seeing it. It ain't much of a 'ouse—not modern, too little, and all stairs."

It made me furious to hear her running me down and to have no chance to defend myself.

"Nevertheless, I rather like it, and I think I'll see it," the little lady said.

She went from room to room, making notes of the accommodations and thinking aloud as she set them down. "Four floors besides the basement. On the top floor two bedrooms; they'll do for Robbie and Joan and the nurse. On the next floor one bedroom and a bathroom; I'll have that for myself. On the second floor one big room, running from front to back; that's where we'll have the parrot and the piano and where I'll do my sewing. On the ground floor a dining room in front and a bedroom at the back; the bedroom at the back will do for cook. I won't have anyone sleeping below stairs. It's a very wee house but

tremendously cosy. And what pretty views—the garden in the square in front, and the old gray church with its graveyard at the back! It's all so green and quiet, like being in the country."

She had far outdistanced the caretaker, hurrying over the first two floors that she might get to the top by herself. Now, as she descended, she inspected each room more leisurely. As yet she said no word that would indicate that she had recognized me. I wondered what her motive had been in coming; whether she had deliberately sought me or stumbled on me simply by accident. I would have known her anywhere, though I had been blind and deaf by the fragrance of Jacqueminot that clung about her.

She had come to the tiny landing on the second floor when something familiar in her surroundings struck her. She stood there holding the handle of the door and wrinkling her forehead. "It's odd," she whispered; "I can't understand it." She turned the handle and entered. The room smelt stuffy; its windows had

not been opened since she was last there. The sunlight, pouring in, revealed motes of dust which rose up dancing every time she stirred. In the grate were the accumulated ashes of many fires. Drawn across the hearth was the shabby couch. Nothing had been altered since she had left it. She passed her hand across her eyes. "It can't be; it would be too strange to find it like that." Then she started to reconstruct the scene as she remembered it. "Robbie was there against the window, asking how many Huns his daddy had brought down, and I was sitting here in the shadow when quite suddenly we heard his tread on the stairs. The door opened; he said something about being sorry that he'd frightened us, and then . . . Why, yes, I'm positive."

She stepped out onto the veranda and stood looking down into the square. When she turned to reënter her eyes were moist and shining. "You *are* the little house. Oh, little house, I've dreamt of you so often. Does he dream of you too, where he is out there? Was I right to run away and to doubt him? If you had a

tongue you could tell me; did he say hard things about me when he found me gone on coming back?"

VI

Two weeks later they took possession of me. They did it with so much friendliness that at the end of a month it was as though we had always lived together. Even the furniture fitted into all my odd nooks and angles as if it had been made especially for me. And, indeed, it might have been, for most of it was created in the reign of Queen Anne, at which period my walls were, as one might say, feeling their legs. It was very pleasant, when night had settled down and everyone was sleeping, to listen to the conversations which were carried on between the newcomers and my own floors and stairs. One grandfather's clock was particularly interesting in his reminiscences. He had told the time to Dr. Johnson and had ticked away the great lexicographer's last hours. On this account he was inclined to be amusingly self-important; it was a permanent source of grievance with him that, so far as the present

generation was concerned, his pedigree was unknown. There were times when he would work himself into such passions that his weights would drop with a bang. He was always sorry for it next morning and ashamed to face the little lady. As she came down to breakfast she would catch sight of his hands and say, "So the poor old clock has stopped again! The old fellow's worn out. We shall have to send him to the mender's."

Perhaps it is hardly fair to repeat this gossip about one piece of the furniture, for everything, myself included, was old; whether we were tables, chair, or staircases, we all had our crotchets and oddities. But however much we differed among ourselves we were united in adoring the youth of the little lady and her children. More than any of us the whispering parrot adored her.

The whispering parrot was a traveller. He had come from Australia fifty years ago. He plays so indispensable a part in producing the happy ending that he deserves an introduction.

He had been the gift of the children's grandfather, a retired general. His plumage was Quaker gray, all except his breast and crest, which were a wonderful rose pink. He had black beady eyes which took in everything; what they saw he invariably remembered. He had a confidential, hoarse way of speaking that never rose above a whisper. When you heard him for the first time you supposed that he had a bad sore throat. He had a favourite question which he asked whenever he thought he was not being paid sufficient attention, "What shall we talk about?" He would ask it with his head cocked on one side, while he rubbed his feathers up and down the bars. "What shall we talk about?" he would ask the little lady as she sat sewing beneath the lamp of an evening. She was always by herself when the children had been put to bed. She had no callers and never went anywhere.

"Talk about Polly!" she would say. "I don't know, you good gray bird. Did you think I was lonely? Well, let's see! Who loves Mummy best? Can you answer me that?"

Then he would cock his head still farther on one side and pretend to think furiously. She would have to ask him several times before he would attempt an answer. Usually, when he got ready, he would clear his throat and whisper, "The dustman." After which he would laugh as though his sides were aching: "What a naughty Polly! What a naughty Polly!"

She would maintain a dignified silence till she had emptied her needle. Then she would glance at him reproachfully, "Think again, Mr. Impudence—not the dustman."

So he would think again and having clambered all over his cage and hung upside down to amuse her, would hazard, "Polly?"

"Not Polly."

Then he would make any number of suggestions, though he knew quite well the answer she required. After each wrong guess he would go off into gales of ghostly merriment. At last he would say very solemnly, "Robbie."

"Yes, Robbie," she would reply and scratch his head; after which the game was ended.

Soon she would fold away her work, put out the lights, and climb the narrow stairs to her quiet bed.

It seemed very sad that, when she was so young, she should have to spend so many hours in talking to a rascally old bird. One can be young for so short a time. How short, those who are old know best.

There were evenings, however, when, after the parrot had answered "Robbie," she would whisper, "I wonder!" and clasp her hands in her lap, gazing straight before her. On these evenings she would sit very late and would look down at her feet from time to time, as though expecting to see someone crouching there. Taxis would chug their way into the square and draw up at one or other of the dolls' houses. The taxi door would open and after a few seconds close with a bang. There would be the rustle of a woman's dress and the tripping of her slippered feet across the pavement; the bass muttering of her husband paying the driver; laughter; the rattling of a key in the latch; and silence. The little lady would

sit quite motionless, listening to the secret homecomings of lovers. Then at last she would nod her head, "You're right, Polly, I expect. There's no one else. No doubt it's Robbie who loves me best."

VII

But it wasn't Robbie. The dining-room window was the first to make the discovery. Being on the ground floor, it gazes across the pavement under the trees and sees many things after nightfall which are missed by the upper stories. The first and second time that something unusual happened I was not told; not until the third time was I taken into the secret. The dining-room window does most of the watching for the entire house; it sees so much that it has learnt to be discreet.

It was Armistice night when the unusual happening first occurred. London had gone mad with relief from suspense. Wherever a barrel organ could be found people were dancing. Where more suitable music was not available tin cans were being beaten with a dervish,

rhythmic monotony. Dance the people must. Their joy had gone into their feet; they could not convince themselves that peace had come till they had danced themselves to a standstill. They invented impromptu steps, dancing twenty abreast in the open spaces, humming any tune that caught their fancy, with their arms linked in those of strangers. But there were no strangers that night; everyone was a friend. Top hats, evening dress, corduroys, and privates' uniforms hobnobbed together. A mighty roar of laughter and singing went up from thousands of miles of streets, dim lit and dusk drenched to ward off the ancient peril from the air. How suddenly unmodern peril had become! All London laughed; all England; all the world. The sound reached the Arctic; polar bears lumbered farther northward, stampeded by the strum of our guffaws. If there were inhabitants on Mars they must have heard. The war was won. The news was so incredible that we had to make a noise to silence our doubts.

Everything that could rejoice was out under

the stars making merry. We had hidden away so long, walked so stealthily, wept so quietly, hated so violently that our right to be happy was almost too terrible to bear. We expressed our joy foolishly, hysterically, inadequately, by shouting, embracing, climbing lamp posts, riding on the roofs of taxis. What did it matter so long as we expressed it and brought the amazing truth home to ourselves? The last cannon had roared. The final man had died in battle. The wicked waste of white human bodies was ended. There would be no more rushing for the morning papers and searching the casualty lists with dread; no more rumours of invasions; no more mustering for new offensives. The men whom we loved were safe; they had been reprieved at the eleventh hour. We should have them home presently, seated by their firesides. It seemed like the fulfilment of a prophet's ecstasy; as though sorrow and crying had passed away and forever there would be no death.

There were two people who did not dance, climb lamp posts, beat tin cans, and ride on

the roofs of taxis that night. Perhaps they were the only two in London; they were both in Dolls' House Square. The little lady was one. She had tucked Joan and Robbie safely in their beds. She had kissed them "Good-night" and turned the gas on the landing to a jet. She had gone part way down the narrow stairs and then . . . and then she had come back. She had picked up Joan and carried her into Robbie's room. When the two heads were lying close together on the pillow she had seated herself in the darkness beside them.

The little boy stretched up his arms to pull her down; she resisted. His hands wandered over her face and reached her eyes. They were wet. His heart missed a beat. He knew what that meant. So often in the dark, dark night he had wakened with the sure sense that she was crying and had tiptoed down the creaking stairs to creep in beside her and place his small arms tightly about her. "Never mind; you have me, Mummy." That was what he always said. He whispered it now.

"Yes, I have my wee man."

"And me, Mummy," Joan murmured sleepily.

"Mummy knows. She has you both. Don't worry about her. She's feeling silly to-night."

"Because you're happy?" Joan questioned.

"Yes, happy for so many little boys and girls whose soldier daddies will be coming back to them soon. Don't talk any more. Go sleepy-bye."

But Robbie knew that it wasn't happiness that made her cry; he knew that she was crying because she had no soldier to come back. What could he say to comfort her? His eyes grew drowsy while he thought about it. He waited till Joan was in Sleepy-bye Land, then with an effort he opened his eyes.

"Mummy, do you know what I'd like best for Christmas?"

"I thought you were sleeping. Don't tell me now. There's heaps of time. It's six weeks till Christmas."

"But Joan and I have talked about it," he persisted. "We don't want him, if you don't want him."

"What is he, dear? If he doesn't cost too much you shall have him."

Robbie procrastinated now that he had brought his mother to the point of listening. It was a delicate proposal that he was about to make. "I don't know whether you can get one," he hesitated. "A boy at my school got one without asking, and it wasn't even Christmas."

He was sitting up in bed now, very intense and serious, and very much awake.

"But you've not told me yet what it is you want. If you don't tell me I can't say whether I can afford it."

She slipped her arm about the square little body and, feeling how it trembled, held it close against her breast. He hid his face in the hollow of her neck. "Robbie's place," she whispered. "If it's difficult to say, whisper it to Mother there."

His lips moved several times before a sound came and then, "If it isn't too much trouble, we would like to have a daddy."

Against his will she held him back from her, trying to see his eyes. "But why?"

It was he who was crying now. "Oh, Mummy, I didn't mean to hurt you. . . . To be like all the other little boys and girls."

When at last he was truly asleep and she had come down to the lamplit room in which she sewed she did not take up her work. The parrot tried to draw her into conversation with his eternal question, "What shall we talk about?"

"Nothing to-night, Polly," she said.

Presently she crossed the room and, pulling back the curtains, stood staring out into the blackness. So her children had felt it too—the weight of loneliness! She had tried so hard to prevent them from sharing it; had striven in so many ways to be their companion. Try as she would, she could never make up for a father's absence. She could never give them the sense of security that a man could have given without effort, even though he had loved them less. It was a bitter realization—one which vaguely she had always dreaded must come to

her. It was doubly bitter coming to her now, on a night when all the world was glad. She might be many things to her children; she could never be a man. . . . What did Robbie think? That you bought a father from an agency or engaged him through an advertisement? She smiled sadly. "Not so easy as that.."

"What shall we talk about?" asked the parrot.

She drew the curtains together, extinguished the lights, and groped her way up to bed.

But her eyes had not peered far enough into the blackness. There was another person in London who had not danced or climbed lamp posts or ridden on the roofs of taxis that night. For three hours he had watched the little house from the shadow of the trees across the road. From the pavement, had you been passing, you would hardly have distinguished him as he leant against the garden railings. The only time he gave a sign of his presence was when the red flare of his cigarette betrayed him. He did not seem to be planning harm to anyone; he could not have done much harm in

any case, for the left sleeve of his coat hung empty. He was simply waiting for something, that he hoped might happen. At last his patience was rewarded when she drew aside the curtain and stood with the lighted room behind her, staring out into the blackness. Only when she had again hidden herself and all the house was in darkness did he turn to go. He was there the next night and the next. It was after his third night of watching that the dining-room window told me.

VIII

The fourth night he was there again. By this time everything in the house, from the kettle in the kitchen to the carpet on the topmost landing, was aware that a one-armed man was hidden beneath the trees across the road, watching. The whole house was on the alert, listening and waiting—everybody, that is to say, except the people most concerned, who inhabited us. It seemed strange that they alone should be in ignorance. The grandfather clock did his best to tell them. "Beware; take care.

Beware; take care," he ticked as his pendulum swung to and fro. They stared him in the face and read the time by his hands, but they had no idea what he was saying.

What could it be that the watching man wanted? Whatever it was, he wanted it badly, for it was by no means pleasant to stand motionless for several hours when the November chill was in the air. Nor did he seem to find it pleasant, for every now and then he coughed and shook himself like a dog inside his coat, and sunk his chin deeper into his collar.

He had been there since six o'clock. He had seen the cook and the housemaid come up the area steps and meet their respective sweethearts under the arc light at the end of the square. There was only one other grown person in the house besides the little lady—Nurse; and Nurse had been in bed since the afternoon with a sick headache. He could not have known that. It was at precisely eight that he consulted his luminous wrist watch, crossed the road, hesitated, and raised the knocker very determinedly, as if he had only just arrived

and had not much time to spare. *Rat-tat-tat!* The sound echoed alarmingly through the silence. The little lady dropped her sewing in her lap and listened. The sound was repeated. *Rat-tat-tat!* It seemed to say, "Come along. Don't keep me waiting. You've got to let me in sooner or later. You know that."

"It can't be the postman at this hour," she murmured, "and yet it sounds like his knock."

Laying her work on the table beneath the lamp, she rose from her chair and descended. She opened the door only a little way at first, just wide enough for her to peer out, so that she could close it again if she saw anything disturbing.

"So you do live here!" The man outside spoke gladly. "I guessed it could be no one else the moment I saw that the house was no longer empty."

She opened the door a few more inches. His tone puzzled her by its familiarity. His face had not yet come into the ray of light which slanted from the hall across the steps.

"You don't recognize me?" he questioned.

"I called to let you know that I did fetch that taxi. It's been on my mind that you thought I deserted you. Taxicabs were hard to find in an air raid."

She flung the door wide. "Why it's——" She didn't know how to call him—how to put what he was into words. He had been simply "the American officer"—that was how she had named him in talking with the children. He had been often remembered, especially during the fireside hour when in imaginary adventures he had been the hero of many stories. How brave she had made him, and how often she had feared that he was dead! There were other stories which she had told only to herself, when the children were asleep and the house was silent. And there he stood on the threshold, with the same gallant bearing and the same eager smile playing about his mouth. "I've always been loved and trusted; you love and trust me, too"—that was what his smile was saying to her.

Her heart was beating wildly; but nothing of what she felt expressed itself in what she

said. "I'm by myself. I've let the maids go out. I'm terribly apologetic for having treated you so suspiciously."

He laughed and stepped into the hall. "I seem fated to find you by yourself; you were alone last time. I'm in hospital and have to be back by ten. Won't you let me sit with you for half an hour?"

He had begun to remove his top coat awkwardly. His awkwardness attracted her attention.

"Please let me do that for you."

"Oh, I'm learning to manage. It's all right. . . . Well, if you must. Thanks."

She didn't dare trust herself. There was a pricking sensation behind her eyes. She motioned to him to go first. As she followed him up the stairs she gazed fixedly at his flattened left side, where the sleeve was tucked limply into the tunic pocket. She knew that when she was again face to face with him she must pretend not to have noticed.

He entered the room and stood staring

round. "The same old room! But it didn't belong to you then. How did you manage it?"

"Easily, but not on purpose."

"Truly, not on purpose?" His tone was disappointed.

"No, not on purpose. I didn't know the name of the square or the number of the house that night. I stumbled on it months later by accident. It was still to let."

"So you took it? Why did you take it?"

"Because I'd liked it from the first and it suited me," she smiled. "Why else?"

"I thought perhaps . . ."

"Well, say it. You're just like Robbie. When Robbie wants to tell me something that's difficult, he has a special place against which he hides his face; it's easier to tell me there. You men are all such little boys. If it's difficult to tell, you do the same and say it without looking at me."

She reseated herself beneath the lamp and took up her sewing. "Now, tell me, why did you want me to say that I took it on purpose?"

"I don't quite know. Perhaps it was because,

had I been you, I should have taken it on purpose. One likes to live in places where one has been happy, even though the happiness lasted only for an hour."

He wandered over to the couch before the fire and sat down where he could watch her profile and the slope of her throat beneath the lamp. The only sound was the prick of the needle and the quiet pulling through of the thread. It had all happened just as he would have planned it. He was glad that she was alone. He was glad that it was in this same room that they had met. He was glad in a curious unreasoning way for the faint fragrance of Jacqueminot that surrounded her. It had been just like this at the Front that he had thought of her—thought of her so intensely that he had almost caught the scent and the rustle of her dress, moving toward him through the squalor of the trench. Through all the horror the brief memory of her gentleness had remained with him. And what hopes he had built on that memory! He had told himself that, if he survived, by hook or by crook he

would search her out. In hospital, when he had returned to England, all his impatience to get well had been to get to her. In his heart he had never expected success. The task had seemed too stupendous. And now here he was, sitting with her alone, the house all quiet, the fire shining, the lamp making a pool of gold among the shadows, and she, most quiet of all, taking him comfortably for granted and carrying on with her woman's work. At last he was at rest; not in love with her, he told himself, but at rest.

It was she who broke the silence. "How did you know? What made you come so directly to this house?"

He met her eyes and smiled. "Where else was there to come? It was the one place we both knew. I took a chance at it." And then, after a pause, "No, that's not quite true. I was sent up to London for special treatment. The first evening I was allowed out of hospital, I hurried here and, finding that our empty house was occupied, stayed outside to watch it."

"But why to watch it?"

"Because it was a million to one that you weren't the tenant. Before I rang the bell I wanted to make certain. You see I don't know your name; I couldn't ask to see the lady of the house. If she hadn't been you, how could I have explained my intrusion?"

"And then you made certain?"

He nodded. "You came to the window on Armistice night and stood for a few minutes looking out."

"I remember." She shivered as if a cold breath had struck her. "I was feeling stupid and lonely; all the world out there in the darkness seemed so glad. I wish you had rung my bell. That was three nights ago."

"You mean why did I let three nights go by. I guess because I was a coward. I got what we call in America 'cold feet.' I thought——"

He waited for her to prompt him. She sat leaning forward, her hands lying idle in her lap. He noticed, as he had noticed nearly a year ago, the half moon that her shoulders made in the dimness. She was extraordinarily motionless; her motionlessness gave her an at-

mosphere of strength. When she moved her gestures said as much as words. Nothing that she did was hurried.

"Tell me what you thought," she said quietly. She spoke to him as she would have spoken to Robbie, making him feel very young and little. When she spoke like that there was not much that he would not have told her.

"I thought that you might not remember me or want to see me. We meet so oddly; after the lapse of a year you might easily have regarded my call as an impertinence."

"An impertinence!" There were tears in her eyes when she raised her head. "You lost your arm that I and my children might be safe, and you talk about impertinence."

"Oh, that!" He glanced down at his empty sleeve. "That's nothing. It's the luck of the game and might have happened to anybody."

"But you lost it for me," she reasserted, "that I might be safe. You must have suffered terribly."

Seeing her distress, he laughed gaily. "Losing an arm wasn't the worst that might have

happened. I'm one of the fortunate ones; I'm still above ground. The thing wasn't very painful—nothing is when you've simply got to face it. It's the thinking about pain that hurts. . . . Hulloa, look at the time; I can just get back to the hospital by ten. If we're late, they punish us by keeping us in next night."

At the top of the stairs as she was seeing him out he halted and looked back into the room. "It's quiet and cosy in there. I don't want to leave; I feel like a boy being packed off to school. You can't understand how wonderful it is after all the marching and rough times and being cut about to be allowed to sit by a fire with a woman. I loved to watch you at your sewing."

"It's because you're tired," she said, "more tired than you know. You must come very often and rest."

IX

In the weeks that followed the little house came to know him well. Everybody in the little house treated him as though his injury were a decoration, which had been won especially

in their defence. They were prouder to see him come walking up their steps with his blue hospital band on his remaining arm than if Sir Douglas Haig himself had called upon them. Nobody took any count of the frequency of his visits—nobody except himself. Nobody seemed to think it strange that the moment the doctors had finished his dressings he should wonder off to Dolls' House Square. Nobody seemed to guess just how fond he was of the little lady. He hardly guessed himself. There were times when he wondered exactly how fond he was. He did not believe he was in love with her; the feeling that he had was too gentle. He had always understood that love was exciting, passionate, and tumultuous with dreads, whereas in her presence he knew neither fears nor hesitancies. He wasn't the least in terror that he would lose her. He felt simply safe, the way a ship might feel when the winds had ceased to buffet and it lay still in a sheltered harbour on a level keel. This feeling of safety struck him as an extraordinary sensation to be produced in a soldier by a

woman; he was a trifle ashamed of it, as though it were not quite manly.

While he spoke with her he found himself believing with a childlike faith that all women were mothers and that the world was good. He knew that for the present he could not do without her, but he was at a loss to imagine what he would do with her for always. She was like religion—she went beyond him, was bigger and better. He only dimly understood her, but was comfortable in believing that everything hidden was as kind as the part he knew. In a strangely intimate way he worshipped her, as a child adores his mother, thinking her the most perfect and beautiful being in the world. He discovered in her a wisdom of which nothing in her conversation gave the least indication; her unhurried attitude toward life created the impression. If this were love, then all the hearsay information he had gathered on the subject was mistaken.

There were days when, after his wound had been dressed and he had left the hospital, he made a pretence that he was not going to visit

her. He told himself that he was making her a habit, and that to make a habit of anyone was foolish. Instead of going to Dolls' House Square he would invent some urgent business and take himself off cityward. But expeditions in which she had no share soon grew flat. He would find himself thinking about her, wondering whether she was waiting for him. He would end up, as he always ended up, by jumping in a taxi and knocking on her door in Dolls' House Square.

He never once found her out. There was invariably a welcome for him. He would take his seat by the fire in the quiet room and watch her sewing till the darkness deepened and the lamp had to be brought out. It didn't seem to matter much whether he talked or was silent; her contentment seemed complete when he was there. She made no effort to entertain him, which was the best proof of their friendship. She was perfectly willing that he should ignore her, if that was his mood, by reading the paper or playing with the children.

Though she made no effort to entertain him

the entire household had reorganized itself in readiness for his sharp *rat-a-tat*. Everyone, without expressing the fact, recognized that it was nice to have a man about the house. When one rose in the morning there was something to which to look forward now. A man dropping in, even occasionally, gave this group of women a sense of protection and of contact with the unwidowed world.

To Robbie and Joan he stood for something midway between a big brother and a pal. They had sharp rivalries as to who should light his cigarette. It wasn't easy for him to grip the box between his knees and strike the match with only one hand. They watched him and by anticipating his wishes tried to constitute themselves his missing hand.

When they were with him the little lady withdrew into the background, making herself so still and self-effacing that it scarcely seemed that he had come to see her. It was as though she had three children; he appeared to be their friend much more than hers. He would carry them off to the Zoo, to matinées, or to see the

Christmas toys in the West End shops. Sometimes she would accompany them; more often she would listen to their adventures when they had returned. But she never was really left out. While they were absent from her she formed the main topic of conversation. Of this she was well aware; if she had not been she would not have been so happy.

In a way she derived more pleasure from staying at home and picturing them laughing through the crowded streets, going into tea shops, riding in taxis, and coming back through the dusk together. The children looked so proud in their sole possession of a man, especially of a soldier who had been wounded. Had their father come through the war, that was how they would have looked in his company. She was glad that they should get away from skirts. He could give them something which it was not in her power to give, however much she loved them. She was only a woman. Her reward followed when they returned a little conscience-stricken at having left her, bringing with them a present as in-

disputable proof that she had been remembered.

One evening, in talking with her after the children had been put to bed, he asked her if she didn't think she ought to go out more often.

"I know I ought."

"Then why don't you?"

She smiled gently, thinking how little he knew of the world. "When you've not got your own man to take you, it's difficult. The world moves in pairs. A woman can't go to many places unaccompanied."

"But surely you don't need to. You must have quantities of friends who would be glad——"

She cut him short. "When a woman is left by herself she learns a good many things about men that she didn't suspect when she was married. The men she would trust herself with have their wives or fiancées—they have no time to trouble over shipwrecked women like myself. And the other kind of men . . . The world has no place for a widow. It doesn't mean to be unkind, but it simply doesn't know

what to do with her. Unmarried women consider her an unfair rival; they think she's seeking a second chance before they've had their first. In the old days India solved the problem by burying us with our husbands. In England they do the same thing, only less frankly. It's rather stupid to have to live and yet to be treated as though you ought to be dead. One fights against it at first; then one gradually becomes reconciled to being out of the running. If one's wise she puts all her living into her children."

"But that's not fair," he spoke hotly.

"It's the way it happens."

He sat frowning into the fire. What she had told him had upset all his preconceptions about her. Without looking at her he restarted the conversation. "I've thought of you as being so happy. I always thought of you that way at the Front. I've pictured you as being perched high on a ledge out of reach of waves and storms. From the first you've given me the feeling that nothing could hurt or move you, and that nothing could hurt or move me while I was near you. It's a queer thing for a man to

admit to a woman, but you make me feel absolutely safe."

"That's not so very queer," she said, "because that's the way you make me feel."

"Do I? You're not laughing at me?" He swung round, leaning over the back of the couch, his entire attitude one of amazement.

She met his surprise with a quiet smile. "I'm perfectly serious. But you know the reason why we feel so safe in each other's company? It's because, in our different ways, we're both lonely people. We're not like the rest of the world; we don't move in pairs. I'm lonely because I'm a woman on my own, and you're lonely because you're in hospital in a foreign country. We met just at the time when we could give each other courage."

"But you don't look lonely," he protested; "one always thinks of lonely people as being sad and untidy. You always look so terrifically well groomed and expensive. You create the impression that you're either going to or returning from a party. I never saw you when you weren't self-assured and occupied. I used

to wonder how you spared me so much time from your engagements."

"Clever of me, wasn't it?"

Instead of answering her he came over and stood above where she sat stitching beneath the lamp. He was seeing her for the first time, not as wise, self-reliant, and fashionable, but as beautiful, alone, and unprotected. He could almost feel the ache of the bruises she had suffered. He felt self-reproached; what had he given her? Up to now anything that he could have given had seemed too small to mention. He had taken from her continually, supposing that she had a surplus of everything. And all the while she had been sharing his own hunger for the presents that money cannot buy.

"It's great to be alive, when you'd expected to be dead."

It was her turn to be surprised. She raised her head quickly, recognizing a new earnestness in his tone.

"One doesn't talk much about what happened at the Front," he said; "but one can't help feeling that his life was spared for some

definite purpose. I believe the purpose was to be happy and to make others happy. I don't want to hog my own pleasure any more or to trifle in the old slovenly ways. I want to crowd every second with gratefulness for the mere fact of living. That's what's been bringing me here so often. That's why I've been so glad to carry Joan and Robbie away. Kiddies mean so tremendously much more to me than they did before I nearly died. And then there's home and women. I took them for granted once, but now . . . It's like saying one's prayers to be in a good woman's presence. I don't know if you at all understand me. I'm trying to thank you for what you've done."

And there his eloquence failed, leaving him gazing down at her and wondering whether she thought him foolish. She patted his hand, but she did not meet his eyes. "It's all right. Don't explain. I know what you're meaning to say."

"Do you?" He spoke doubtfully. "I think I was trying to ask you if we couldn't be happy together. I'm not married and I'm not engaged;

but I'm not like the other men you mentioned."

"My dear boy, I never thought you were. If I had, you wouldn't have been here. You're honourable all the way through; I knew that the moment I saw you. Does that make you feel better?"

He laughed happily. "Much. Do you know what I believe I've been trying to ask you through all this maze of words? If I get permission from the doctor to stay out late to-morrow night, would you be gay and go with me to a theatre?"

Her eyes met his with gladness. "I should love it."

X

That evening at the theatre was the first conscious step in their experiment of being happy together. She received word from him at lunch time that the doctor's permission had been granted and that he would call for her at seven. The news made her as excited as if she had never been to a theatre before in her life. She spent the afternoon before the mirror, brushing and rebrushing her hair, and in lay-

ing out all the pretty clothes which she knew men liked. It was three years since she had dressed with the deliberate intent that a man should admire her. Once to do that had been two thirds of her life. To find herself doing it again seemed like waking from a long illness; she could hardly bring herself to believe that the monotony of sorrow was ended and that she was actually going to be happy again. She had been made to feel so long that to be happy would be disloyalty to past affections.

She locked her bedroom door for fear any of the servants should guess how she was occupied. She was filled with an exultant shame that she should still be capable of valuing so highly a man's opinion of her appearance. "But I will be happy," she kept telling herself; "I have the right." And then, in a whisper, "Oh, little house, you have been so kind. Wish me luck and say that he'll think me nice."

Outside in the bare black cradle of the trees the November afternoon faded. Sparrows twittered of how winter was almost come. Against the cold melancholy of the London

sky, like silhouettes crayoned on a wall of ice, roofs and chimneys stood smudged. In flickering pin points of incandescence street lamps wakened; night came drifting like a ship into harbour under shrouded sails.

She had been sitting listening for a long time, haunted by childish fears that he would not come. At seven promptly a taxi panted into the square and drew up wheezing and coughing before the little house. Seizing her evening wrap, she ran down the stairs and had her hand on the door before his knock had sounded. "I didn't want to keep you waiting," she explained.

He handed her into the cab. With a groan and a thump the engine pulled itself together, and they made good their escape. As she settled back into her corner, pulling on her gloves, she watched him. So he also had regarded it as a gala night! He was wearing a brand-new uniform and had been at extra pains to make his boots and belt splendid and shiny. She did her best not to be observed too closely, for her eyes were overbright and her colour was high.

She felt annoyed at herself for being so girlish.

"It's tremendous fun. I haven't been to the theatre in the evening since—for years and years," she whispered. "The war is really ended. I'm believing it for the first time."

They dined together at Prince's to the fierce discords of jazz music. It suited her mood; it was primitive and reckless. Diners kept rising between courses and slipping out in pairs to where dancing was in progress. The whole world went in pairs to-night. And she had her man; no one could make her lonely for just this one night. It was exciting to her to notice how much more they seemed to belong to each other now that they were in public. He felt it also, for he showed his sense of pride and ownership in a hundred little ways. It was good to be owned after having been left so long discarded. As he faced her across the table he had the air of believing that everybody was admiring her and envying him his luck. She was immensely grateful that he should think so. It was as though he could hear them saying, "How on earth did a one-armed fellow

do it?" Had they asked him, he could only have told them, "The house was empty, so I entered." Yes, and even he had not guessed how empty! But what had changed her? Knowing nothing about the locked door and how her afternoon had been spent, he was puzzled. All he knew was that the woman whom he had thought perfect had revealed herself as more perfect. She had become radiantly beautiful in a way quite new and unexpected.

Of the play to which they went she saw but little; all she realized was that it was merry—a fairy tale of life. One does not notice much when the heart is swollen with gladness. People sang, and looked pretty, and fell in love. Everyone was paired and married before the curtain was rung down. Something, however, she did remember: two lilting lines which had been sung:

And, while the sun is shining,
Make hay, little girl, make hay.

They kept repeating themselves inside her head. Unconsciously in the darkness as they

were driving home, she started humming them.

"What did you say?" he questioned.

"I didn't say anything. It was just a snatch from a tune we heard."

"Was it? Won't you hum it again?"

So in the intermittent gloom of the passing lights she tried; but for some reason, inexplicable to herself, it made her feel choky. She couldn't reach the end. Gathering her wrap closer about her, she drew the fur collar higher to hide the stupid tears which had forced their way into her eyes.

"I believe you're crying!" he exclaimed with concern. "Do tell me what's the matter."

"I'm too happy," she whispered brokenly. The taxi drew up against the pavement with a jerk. There was no knowing what he might say next to comfort her. She both yearned to learn and dreaded. Flight was the safer choice. Before he could assist her, she had jumped out. "Come to-morrow and I'll thank you properly. I can't now. And—I'm sorry for having been a baby."

Catching at her skirts she fled up the steps

and let herself into the darkened house. Not until his wheels had moved reluctantly away did she climb the narrow stairs to the room from which she had departed so gaily. Her solitariness had returned. She had had her own man for a handful of hours. They were ended.

As she threw off her finery she could still hear that voice persistently advising

And, while the sun is shining,
Make hay, little girl, make hay.

In the darkness she flung herself down on the bed, burying her face in the pillow. "I want to; oh, I want to," she muttered.

XI

For three weeks she followed the song's advice. No one knew how long happiness would last. With her it had never lasted. He would leave her presently; already he was anticipating an early return to America.

"I shall feel terribly flat when you've gone," she told him.

"But I'll write. I'll write you the longest letters."

"Ah, but letters aren't the same as being together."

He didn't seem to share her need of him, and it hurt. If he did share it, it was unconsciously. He had yet to awaken to what the need meant. She had allowed him to become too sure of her, perhaps; had she kept him more uncertain he might have awakened. In any case it was too late to alter attitudes now and to think up reasons.

He liked her in the jolliest kind of way, as the most splendid of diversions; but she wasn't essential to him for all time—only for the present. She treasured no illusions about the longest letters. She knew men—the world was filled with women; out of sight would be out of mind. So every evening when he visited her her heart was in her throat till she had made him confess that he had not yet received his embarkation orders. Some day he would tell her that he was going and would expect her to congratulate him. She would have to

smile and pretend that she was glad for his sake. After that he would vanish, and the long eventlessness would recommence. He would write intimately and often at first; little by little new interests would claim him. There would be a blank, and then, after a long silence, a printed announcement, curtly stating that he had found his happiness elsewhere.

She saw herself growing old. The children would spring up so quickly. She would be left with her pride, to dress and make herself beautiful for an anonymous someone whose coming was indefinitely postponed. Youth would go from her. For interminable evenings, stretching into decades, she would watch afternoons fade into evenings. Everything would grow quiet. She would sit beneath the lamp at her sewing. The whispering parrot would take pity on her and croak, "What shall we talk about?" Even that game would end one day, for Robbie would become a man and marry. When that had happened it wouldn't be truthful for the parrot to tell her that Robbie loved her best. She would listen for the clock to

strike, the fire to rustle, the coals to drop in the grate. Toward midnight taxis would enter the square. Lovers would alight. She would hear the paying of the fare, the tapping of a woman's high-heeled shoes on the pavement, the slipping of the key into the latch, the opening and closing of the door, and then again the silence. She would fold up her work, turn out the lights, and stand alone in the darkness, invisible as a ghost.

Ah, but he had not sailed yet. "Make hay, little girl, make hay." His going was still only a threat. There was time, still time. She set a date to her respite. She would not gaze beyond it. If she could only have him till Christmas!

Meanwhile he kept loyally to his contract that they should be happy together. He gave her lavishly of his time. If he guessed how much the gift meant he said nothing to show it. He was like a great friendly schoolboy in his cheerfulness; he filled every niche of her desire. Now, in the afternoon, when he took the children on adventures, she found herself

included. On the return home he shared with her the solemn rite of seeing them safely in bed. Then forth they would sally on some fresh excursion. Always and increasingly there was the gnawing knowledge that the end was nearer in sight—that soon to each of the habits they were forming they would have to say, "We have done it for the last time."

We, the bricks and mortar of the little house, watched her. We grew desperate, for we loved her. What we had observed and overheard by day we discussed together by night. If we could prevent it we were determined that he should not go.

"But, if he goes," creaked the staircase, "he may return. They used to say in my young days that the heart grows fonder through absence."

"Rubbish," banged the door on the first landing. "Rubbish, I say."

"He'll go," ticked the grandfather clock pessimistically. "He'll go. He'll go."

"Not if I know it," shouted the door, and banged again.

We had come to a few nights before Christ-

mas. Which night I do not remember, but I recall that we had started our decorations. Mistletoe was hanging in the hall. Holly had been arranged along the tops of the picture frames. The children had been full of whisperings and secrets. Parcels had already begun to arrive. They were handed in with a crackling of paper and smuggled upstairs to a big cupboard in which they were hidden from prying eyes. The children were now in bed, sleeping quietly for fear of offending Santa Claus. The little lady was in the room where she worked, checking over her list of presents. She had got something for everyone but Robbie; she had postponed buying Robbie's present for a very special reason of which we were all aware. Perhaps it was superstition; perhaps a desperate hope. He had told her what he wanted; it didn't look as if she would be able to get it. "It's no good waiting," she told herself; "I shall have to buy him something tomorrow."

Just then, as if in answer to her thoughts, an impatient *rat-tat-tat* resounded. It was his

unmistakably, but he had never come so late as this before. All day she had listened and been full of foreboding; she had despaired of his ever coming. There was an interval after the door had been opened, during which he removed his coat. She could picture his awkwardness in doing it. Then the swift, leaping step of him mounting the stairs. Why had he delayed so long, only to come to her at the last moment in such a hurry? She rose from her chair to face him, her hands clenched and her body tense, as if to resist a physical blow. As he appeared in the doorway his lips were smiling. There was evidently something which he was bursting to tell her. On catching sight of her face he halted. His smile faded.

"What's the matter? What's happened?"

She unclenched her hands and looked away from him. "Nothing."

"There must be something. Something's troubling you. What have you been doing with yourself this evening?"

Her gaze came back to him. She smiled

feebly. "Wondering whether you were coming, and worrying over Robbie's present."

"Robbie's present! That's nothing to worry over. We'll go together and choose one to-morrow. I'll have time."

"Time!" She straightened up bravely, the way she had rehearsed the scene so often in her imagination. "Then it's true. You won't be here for Christmas? You're sailing?"

Her knowledge of his doings was uncanny. He came a step nearer, but she backed away. He realized her fear lest he should touch her. For a moment he was offended. Then, "My orders came to-day. How did you know? It was what I came to tell you."

"How did I know!" She laughed unsteadily. "How does one know anything? The heart tells one things sometimes. You'll be busy to-morrow—so many other things to think about. Robbie's present doesn't matter. It's growing late. . . . Good-bye."

He stood astonished at her abruptness. What had he done that she should be so anxious to rid herself of him? When he did not seem to

see her proffered hand, but stared at her gloomily, her nerves broke. "Go. Why don't you go?" she cried fiercely. "You know you'll be happy."

"You want me to go?" he asked quietly.

Had she heard her own voice she would have given way to weeping. With her handkerchief pressed tightly against her lips, she nodded.

He turned slowly, looked back from the threshold for a sign of relenting, and dragged his way haltingly down the stairs. In the hall beneath the mistletoe he paused to listen. He fancied he had heard the muttering of sobbing. So long as he paused he heard nothing; it was only when he began to move that again he thought he heard it. Having flung his coat about his shoulders, he eased his arm into the sleeve. This wasn't what he had come for—a very different ending!

And now the chance of the little house had arrived. Windows, chairs, tables, walls, we had all pledged ourselves to help her. He attempted to let himself out; the front door re-

fused to budge. He pulled, tugged, and worked at the latch without avail.

"Shan't go. Shan't go. Shan't go," ticked the grandfather's clock excitedly. Then the usual thing happened, which always happened when the grandfather's clock got excited. There was a horrible *whirr* of the spring running down; the weights dropped with a bang.

In the silence that followed he listened. She thought he had gone. There could be no mistake now; she was crying as if her heart would break.

The stairs creaked to warn her as he ascended. She could not have heard them, for when he stepped into the room she took no notice. She had sunk to the floor and lay with her face hidden in the cushions of the chair, with the gold light from the lamp spilling over her. For some moments he watched her—the shuddering rise and fall of her shoulders.

"You told me to go," he said. "The little house won't let me; it was always kind to us." And then, when she made no answer, "It's

true. I've got my sailing orders. But it was you who told me to go."

She was listening now. He knew that, for the half-moon shoulders had ceased to shudder. The smell of Jacqueminot drew him to her. Bending over her, he stole one hand from beneath the buried face. "Do I need to go?"

And still there was no answer. It was then that the old gray parrot spoke. He had pretended to be sleeping. "What shall we talk about?" he whispered hoarsely; and, when an interval had elapsed, "Robbie?"

The little lady who had needed to be loved lifted up her tear-stained face, and the wounded officer who had wanted rest bent lower.

"I don't need to go," he whispered. "I came to bring you Robbie's present. He told me what he wanted."

MOTHER OF GOD

Mother of God

THE old gods were stirring. At last they were being avenged. St. Paul, who had come to Rome expressly to defy their worship, had been executed. Cæsar, who claimed that he himself was a god, had perceived in the Christ of St. Paul a menace; a religion which preached equality to slaves and meekness to soldiers was not to be tolerated. So to inform against a Christian had become an act of piety. Persecution having set in, its victims found themselves compelled to decide whether their beliefs were sufficiently

dear to them to warrant facing the lions or being burned on fête days as living torches.

Unfortunately for these Roman Christians, few of them were able to define with clearness what their beliefs were. St. Paul had appeared among them as a messenger from heaven, overwhelming their credulity by the passion of his oratory. On the road to Damascus his Lord had appeared to him in the clouds. The divine charity of the miracle had melted all his harshness. Nothing that had preceded this miracle counted. From that day, to preach charity had become his mission. "Now abideth faith, hope, and charity; the greatest of these is charity." Upon slaves and freedmen who had known only tyranny such a faith had bestowed a new nobility. But now, when it was too late to inquire of St. Paul more closely, they had discovered that Christ had followers who interpreted him quite differently. There was the church at Antioch which St. Peter had established; there was the church at Jerusalem which James and Jude had instructed. These apostles had known Jesus when he walked

the earth; because of this they disputed St. Paul's authority. St. Paul's defence had been:

"Not knowing Christ in the flesh, old things are passed away. I certify to you that the gospel preached of me is not after man."

It seemed to many that in these words he had marked a difference between himself and apostles whose claim was that they had talked with Jesus. It was as though he had said: "Mine is the higher revelation. My Lord was not a man; he spoke with me from the clouds." Hurt pride had made a virtue of what hostile critics had pointed out as his defect. So he had preached Christ's Godhead, whoever chose to preach his humanity.

His assertion of superiority had been accepted by his converts till now. His own personality, so persuasive and tender, seemed proof of it. He had enabled them to live as spirits, untrammelled as angels, in this sensual and brutal Roman world. But now that he had been executed and Christians were being slaughtered it was reasonable that they should demand an explanation of what lay be-

hind that evasive phrase, "Old things are passed away." What were the old things that their master had concealed from them?

"Before we die for a faith with our wives and families, let us first make sure that it is well founded," the more prudent of the Roman Christians argued.

How to unravel the truth—that was the problem. Christ in the clouds, whom St. Paul had proclaimed, had certainly once been human. He had possessed a body. It must therefore follow that he had had a mother. Where was she? What had become of her? Why in his teachings had St. Paul never mentioned her? Surely the mother of God could have told men more about her son than all the apostles who were founding churches in his name! It was puzzling that none of them should have turned to her for guidance or quoted her as the supreme source of information. Now that conviction was shaken, the ignoring of God's mother gave rise to doubts. In the gloom of the catacombs, where the Christians met for worship, speculations were whispered which never

before had been uttered. How had Jesus, who had become Christ, been born into the world? What had been his means of livelihood and surroundings? Had he gone about his daily tasks like other men or had he been nourished supernaturally? Behind all these questions lay the one vital question: Was he God, as St. Paul had asserted? His mother could have answered. She still could answer, were she living, or if her memories had been recorded. They had all forgotten her, these fiery prophets who had welcomed scourgings and stonings that her son's gospel might be spread. As for St. Paul, without the testimony of the old things, which he had held to be unessential, his vision was capable of being dismissed as a dream imagined. So to recover the old things which must have prompted his vision, the Roman Christians sent out searchers.

An aged soldier named Gaius, crippled by many wars, was found. He was a distant follower of the Christians, beholden to them for kindness. He had not told his story during St. Paul's lifetime, out of fear that it might be

unwelcome. He had been stationed with his legion in Jerusalem those long years ago when Jesus was brought to trial; he had been one of the guard present at his death. Yes, he had seen God's mother. He had heard her entrusted to a disciple: "Woman, behold thy son." She had been led away by the disciple when the dreadful scene was ended. He himself with the other soldiers of the guard had been scattered throughout Arabia by Pontius Pilate, it had been rumoured, to prevent them from corroborating each other's evidence. When asked how long ago that was Gaius replied:

"I was a strong man then."

Here was proof that Jesus's mother had not ascended into heaven with him. Somewhere in the East she might still be living. It was incredible that her son's followers should have been content to lose sight of her. There was so much she could have told them. Who, after her son, could have been holier? She at least must have shared the secret of his loveliness.

Three wise ones were appointed to journey into the East that they might search for tidings

of her. Gaius, the crippled soldier, was the first chosen, in the hope that, despite the lapse of years, he might recognize her. Theophilus, a theologian, was the next, because he was judicial, not easily swept by emotion, and skilled in doctrine. The last was Antonia, whose son had perished in the arena. She had begged the favour that she might assure herself that her son had not been martyred for a god who was a legend.

Not until they had set sail did they become aware how little they had in common. Theophilus, who was ascetic and conscientious, considered himself their leader. He resented being allotted a woman and a barbarian mercenary as companions. He held that scholars of his own caste, who could appreciate his learning, would have been more fitting. Moreover, he was overwhelmed by the significance of his errand, and eager that they should realize their share of the responsibility. But for Gaius, who had begged in the streets of Rome, the voyage was a return to scenes of his youthful plenty. He conjured the East as a banquet spread. In

the East he had never gone hungry—he had never lacked a cloak. When he spoke, it was to recall campaigning incidents, the witchlike beauty of Salome, or how he had crossed the burning desert to storm the rose-red walls of Petra. Most of the time he sat childish and unrevealing, as is the way with men who have outwitted grief by becoming old. Antonia preferred him to the theologian. He at least retained his faith in life's magic. She would take his hand for the comfort of holding it. They both had their dream that a miracle was about to happen. He would recover his lost prowess and march again with clanking legionaires to the rise and fall of nations. Hers was that God's mother, who had suffered the same heartbreak, would restore to her her son. The flashing banks of oars beat a rhythm to their impatience.

Having landed at Cæsarea, they proceeded with caution. Here, too, Christians were being crucified and tortured. When they found the church elder to whom their letter recommended them, he suggested Jerusalem, the Zion of true believers, as the proper place for

pursuing their inquiries. Of God's mother and what had become of her, he was as ignorant as indifferent. He refused to see how such research could serve any useful purpose. He considered their visit untimely in this season of persecution, when wise Christians were doing their best to attract the minimum of attention. His lack of enthusiasm hinted plainly that their presence was unwelcome.

At Jerusalem their mission aroused frank hostility. They were from Rome; for aught one knew, they might be Cæsar's spies. The information they were requiring could easily be twisted to disprove the feasibility of the Christian religion. That they were followers of St. Paul was in itself against them; St. Paul throughout his life had been a disputant. If he had not taken upon himself to preach the gospel to Gentiles, the present mischief would not have happened. The aim of Jesus had been not to convert the world, but to free the Jewish nation from the tyranny of the Romans. The leaders of the Church at Jerusalem had been James and Jude, half brothers of Jesus. Surely

they, who had been of his family, must have known more of his intentions than this Paul, the Tent-Maker, a stranger and an intruder.

"But what was the family of Jesus?" Theophilus hastened to press the question. "How was he born and where? Who was his mother? Is she still living?"

He was immediately suspected of the desire to start a new sect, with himself as its apostle, based on the worship of Christ's mother. Every lip was shut against him. There were too many sects already, without adding another to increase the confusion. In his desperation Theophilus produced Gaius and commanded him to tell his story. The simplicity of the crippled soldier won friends, where the astuteness of the theologian had made enemies. The elders of Jerusalem confessed that the mother of Jesus had borne the name of Mary. She had disappeared after her son's ascension into heaven. It had seemed inexpedient to give her undue prominence lest her evident humanity should detract from her son's Godhead. The disciple to whose care she had been committed

was St. John, now in prison and awaiting martyrdom on the Isle of Patmos. Whether she was still alive or how she had passed the years of her obscurity, no one in Jerusalem had worried to conjecture.

So once again, as at Cæsarea, they were speeded on their journey as dangerous guests, whose companionship might cause calamity. Sailing for Patmos, they learned that St. John, when he had known that his arrest was certain, had hidden God's mother, to whom he had been as a son, leaving her behind him with scanty means at Ephesus.

Ephesus! To Antonia the name was a portent. The city of virgin worship, sacred to Diana! Her heart was clamorous with anticipations. What more propitious place could have been appointed? Even for followers of unclean deities Ephesus was a shrine of pilgrimage and sanctuary. It was the one spot in the pagan world where woman's purity was made an object of reverence. She pictured God's mother as she hoped to find her, sitting peacefully among the cypress groves of the

temple, unrecognized by Diana's priests, queenly and royal in uncomprehended contentment. What could have been her thoughts during all those neglected years, while tidings had reached her of her son's gospel spreading? Men who had not known him had published his secrets. They had quarrelled over their interpretations, narrowing his teachings to synchronize with their own prejudices, proclaiming him contradictorily as an ascetic, as the Jewish Messiah, as the Lord of Heaven, as the Saviour of the Gentiles. But she, who had guided his childish footsteps and comforted him in her bosom, had been forgotten. In thinking thus Antonia was thinking of her own motherhood—of her son, martyred in the Roman arena, and of her pangs of jealousy if in future years strangers, who ignored her, should undertake to explain her son's motives.

Much of this she whispered to Gaius, because he, too, had suffered. As their journey lengthened, his infirmities made him dependent on her; serving him had endeared him to her. To Theophilus she communicated noth-

ing; he was too sternly intellectual and preoccupied with his ponderings. Moreover, were he to guess her dream that God's mother would restore her son to her, he would upbraid her with begging the question—with having conceded that Jesus was God, which was the mystery for the solving of which her honesty had been commissioned.

Past palm-clad islands they came at last to Ephesus. Ephesus sheathed in silver, washed by a purple sea, fragrant with cedars. From far away, long before they had dropped anchor, a great cry went up from the banks of rowers, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" It was a shout to which day and night the streets of the city responded. It was the cry of merchants vending images of the goddess, of pilgrims as they climbed toward the temple, of priests as they drove lowing herds to the sacrifice.

Theophilus went at once in search of the leader of the Christians, feeling certain that in his house he would find God's mother. He

wished his first conference to take place unhampered by the presence of his two less discerning companions. He had formulated his questions: If Christ was indeed God, how could he have been born of woman? If he had been so born, who was his father? What were the circumstances of his upbringing? Who had been his teachers, etc.? But the house which he sought was empty; the leader of the Christians had fled. No one in Ephesus, since the persecution had begun, was willing to own that he had ever been a Christian. In this city of virgin worship, where merchants throve by their fanaticism, to acclaim any god the superior of Diana meant trampling to death by the pilgrim crowds. Since Cæsar had set the example of intolerance there was no protection to be expected from Roman tribunes or centurions. Theophilus did not lack courage; but to suffer in Ephesus the martyrdom which he might have suffered in Rome would add nothing to the world's knowledge. The news of his death would not give confidence to his brethren in Rome in their cruel dying. So he counselled

Antonia and Gaius to exercise discretion and to appear to conform to the worship of Diana while he continued his search. If God's mother were still in Ephesus and if she were indeed God's mother he counted on supernatural agencies to guide him.

Meanwhile Antonia still clung to her faith that God's mother was to be found in the precincts of the temple. From morning till evening she wandered the cypress groves, wistfully scanning faces, convinced that she would recognize her.

One evening, on their return from their fruitless questing, they found Gaius sharing his supper with a beggar as ancient and as crippled as himself. He introduced his guest as an old comrade in arms—a legionary who in his youth had been stationed with him at Jerusalem. After the crucifixion, of which he also had been a witness, he had fought his way through the East, following the Roman Eagles, till broken and discharged he had drifted into Ephesus. There he had met St. John, whom he remembered from Jerusalem days, when Jesus,

his friend and master, had been executed as a political agitator. "St. John the Divine" he had been called in Ephesus, because he had been famed for his visions. Yes, he had had a woman with him—a young woman and yet an old woman, whom he treated as his mother. He didn't know exactly where she was now, but it would not take long to discover. She was still in Ephesus, he was certain; beyond the city walls, he thought, in one of the poorer quarters, where Christians who had not renounced their religion had taken refuge. He promised to pursue inquiries and report in the morning.

When he had departed Theophilus sat thinking. He broached to Antonia the subject that was troubling him. Was it likely that God's mother could be living in such circumstances? If Jesus had been God—was God, in fact, at present—was it credible that he would make known his mother's whereabouts through the agency of a beggar? Surely they had learned all that was necessary. They could add nothing by visiting this humble woman.

Their duty was to set sail for Rome that they might dissuade their brethren from being sacrificed for a delusion. But Antonia pleaded with him.

Next morning the ex-legionary returned with the news that the goal of their mission was at hand. Hobbling on his staff by the side of Gaius, he led the way through the bazaar of the silversmiths, where their ears were deafened with competing cries of merchants selling idols of Diana; past the harbour, where pilgrim galleys swung at anchor, and slaves, unchained from their oars, sprawled at leisure. The two old men in each other's company proved garrulous. They paused to gaze at everything that attracted their attention. Antonia, following, caught snatches of their conversation. Gaius was questioning his friend whether this Mary, mother of Jesus, could work miracles. If she could—— He stooped, so that his words were lost. She guessed what he had said: they could both be made young again. Ah, yes, and if she could, her own lost son would be restored. She glanced at The-

ophilus, noting his impatience. At every step, while her heart beat faster, he seemed to find the journey less promising. They were traversing the sailors' quarter now, mean streets filled with wine taverns from which earringed men gaped after them unfavouringly. She did not dare address him. Were she to give him the excuse he might turn back.

Then the gate in the city wall; a meadow starred with flowers; a hill beyond it, honeycombed with entrances. The ex-legionary explained that those too poor to possess houses dwelt there, having hollowed out caves or enlarged those which had existed from time immemorial. Before one of them he halted, inquiring of a girl which was Mary's. Seeing the girl start, he added:

"These are strangers come from Rome that they may have speech with her. Like yourself, they are Christians."

Reassured, she pointed to a figure seated in strong sunlight. A child had been born to a neighbour, she informed him; Mary was wise in such knowledge. As they approached her

they were aware that the child was sleeping in her lap. Was she young or was she old? So many years since Jesus had died! Her attitude expressed a quiet wonder.

The ex-legionary drew her attention.

"Mother of Jesus, here are strangers who would have word with you."

"Three strangers!" She lifted her eyes. "They were three kings from the East before. They came demanding, 'Where is he that is born King of the Jews?' They rode on camels, bearing gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

She spoke as in a dream and, having spoken, turned back to fondling the child.

Antonia had sunk to her knees; so had Gaius. Theophilus alone stood upright. Thinking they were about to address her, he made an imperative gesture, compelling silence.

"Mother of Jesus," he said, "we are Christians from Rome, where men and women, yes, and even children are dying for thy son's sake. If thy son is God, the Lord of Earth and Heaven, as St. Paul taught us to believe, this is well; in Heaven they will reign with him.

But a doubt has arisen in our minds; wherefore we have been sent that you may offer us proofs."

He waited for encouragement. When none was given he continued:

"To leave this world for a better is of small consequence. But tidings have reached us that have made us uncertain. The Christ whom St. Paul preached was in the clouds; now that persecution has overtaken us we have learned that he was born of thee, who art a woman. It seems strange to us that if Christ was God he should have been born like any other man. Yet how could he have been born otherwise, since he was clothed with a human body?"

"Strange!" she nodded, smiling tenderly, gazing not at Theophilus but at the child.

"Mother of God, how was he born?" Antonia whispered. "That he was God I know since I have seen thee. Without seeing thee, my son knew; he laid down his life that thy son might be glorified."

The faded eyes rested on Antonia. She had to acknowledge they were faded. They were

mortal eyes which had wept like her own. The fancy struck her that God's mother was a mirror in whom all women of whatever age could see themselves reflected.

Was she remembering her question, "How was he born?" or was it repeated? She was certain that God's mother, if she were not speaking, was enabling her to share her thoughts.

"There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will

toward men.' And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.' And they came with haste and found Mary——"

On the pagan hillside, so far from Bethlehem, Antonia listened as in a trance. She, too, heard the choir of angels. She, too, made haste with the shepherds and entered into the stable. There among the stalled oxen was God's mother, nursing a new-born babe, sitting just as she was now sitting. The dumb beasts raised their heads, lowing, telling each other that he was God. In the background Joseph moved restlessly, puzzled by this miracle in which he had no part. When the shepherds were gone the wise men bowed in worship, having seen his star in the East and followed it. Then the flight into Egypt to escape Herod and the return to Nazareth after months of wondering. Those years in Nazareth, did she only imagine them or did God's mother actually

reveal their hidden story? They had been her schooling in patience. His, too. Yet the wealth they had yielded her—all his deeds of beauty which would have been unremembered had she not treasured them in her heart!

"Half their beauty must have been thine, O holiest of mothers."

God's mother looked down at the child. It was sleeping. She shook her head. "He was God."

With that she rose and, walking queenly, vanished into the hillside.

Theophilus was still standing. "What she has told us proves nothing," he said gloomily.

"But the star in the East, the wise men, the shepherds," Antonia pleaded.

"Legends." He shrugged his shoulders, turning his face toward the city. "What a story to take back to Rome, where men are dying for him!"

Gaius added his protest. "The dumb beasts acknowledged him and the choir of angels."

"Mere assertions. Who can tell whether they are true or false?"

He hurried down the hill, paying no heed to the crippled soldier's slower going. Antonia lent Gaius her arm.

"She did not make me young," the old man quavered.

"Perhaps it was because you forgot to ask her."

"And she didn't restore my son to me," Antonia was thinking. Aloud she said, "Tomorrow we will return and ask her."

From the city, as though challenging their faith, the cry of peddlers of idols swelled to greet them, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians."

Theophilus had settled their reckoning when they reached their lodging. His plans were made. A galley, bound for Italy, was sailing. It was their duty, without loss of time, to communicate their disillusionment to their fellow Christians. It was vain for Antonia and Gaius to protest that they were not disillusioned. They begged him to delay that they might pay God's mother yet another visit.

"God's mother!" he took them up sharply. "Are you poets? Must men die in the blood of

the arena for the sake of poetry? I hasten to Rome to prevent them."

"At least carry a letter from us," Antonia urged him.

That night, when Theophilus had departed, Antonia lay awake. Relieved of his presence, her own faith quickened. "The old things are passed away," St. Paul had taught, sweeping aside all the treasured memories of holy motherhood and divine childhood. "Not having known Christ in the flesh, I certify to you that the gospel preached by me is not after man."

But the old things were not passed away. They were vital; at least they were vital to a woman. It was a God in the flesh that the world wanted. What use would be a God who had been born into the world pretending he was a man, pretending that he was capable of surrendering to temptation, when all the time he knew that, in a crisis, he could demand rescue from his legions of embattled angels? She saw the solution to the problem that had puzzled

her of why Christ, who could have saved himself, had died on Calvary and why, having himself ascended, he had permitted his mother still to tread the highroad of lowly commonplace. The explanation lay in Bethlehem. He had indeed been born man, but had so lived that he had become God. He had worked no miracles for his mother, that she might be in all things a pattern for human mothers. If, when he had mounted into Heaven, he had hailed her as Queen of Heaven, he would have robbed her of her humanity and destroyed the worth of her example. Now, as long as the world lasted, every bereft woman would see reflected in Mary her own capacity for gain and loss. Antonia no longer wished that her son might be restored. To-morrow she would revisit Christ's mother.

But on the morrow Gaius was sick, and she nursed him. He spoke continually of the miracle that was to be wrought for him. During the restless night he had become overwhelmingly impressed with Mary's power. She could give him back his youth. If she so willed, he

would arm himself again and march with clanking legionaries to the overthrow of nations.

Two days elapsed. Tottering and weak, he set out, supported by Antonia's arm. Through the bazaar of the silversmiths they wended their way, skirting the harbour, till they passed out through the city gate, across the meadow starred with flowers, to where the peace of the sunlit hill rose up before him. As he approached the consummation of his miracle, Gaius's faith began to falter. Was Christ God or only Jesus? he reopened the argument. If Christ was only Jesus, then to appeal to his mother was in vain.

"He was God," Antonia comforted him. "I believe, but, oh, that we had proof of it!"

The hill was silent. No one stirred. In the white, hot sunshine there was no figure of a woman who sat gazing wonderingly at a child. At sound of their footsteps a girl came to a doorway, the Christian girl who had directed them before.

"You seek Mary?" she questioned. "She is dead. You will not find her."

Their hearts sank. Then Christ was Jesus; He never had been God!

"I can show you where she is buried."

She came out to them, tripping quietly.

Very like to the mother of Jesus they thought her. With her happy air of meekness she led the way. Before an entrance in the hill, against which a rock had been placed, she halted.

"You can see her, if you will help me roll the rock."

Even at this eleventh hour, Gaius clutched at his flying dream that a miracle might be wrought. Were he to touch her body, lost youth might be restored.

They entered the sepulchre. Where the body had rested, lilies were growing. Save for their sweetness, the cave was empty. They stooped incredulously, searching. Before their amazed eyes lilies were multiplying, till the soil of the tomb was carpeted in whiteness.

Hand in hand they knelt, the old man, the young girl, the mother.

"Of a truth she was God's mother," Gaius murmured.

Antonia met his eyes. "God's mother! Then he *is*, he *was*——"

It seemed to her that again she heard that tender voice narrating how Jesus had been born in Bethlehem; the choir of angels; the sleeping village; the star which pointed; the bleating of new-born lambs; the three kings from the East who had ridden in search of God. Journeyed just as she, Gaius, and Theophilus had journeyed.

At the thought of Theophilus hurrying to spread disillusionment, she sprang to her feet.

If men were still to be true to Christ in the arena no time must be lost. Touching Gaius on the shoulder, she whispered:

"Let us now go even unto Rome and declare this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

So they returned with haste to Ephesus, where they found a galley on the point of sailing. The winds favouring them, they overtook

the galley of Theophilus and arrived in Rome before him.

When the report spread that they were come the Christians gathered after nightfall in the catacombs to learn whether Christ's mother had been found and, if so, whether she had been judged to be indeed God's mother.

"But why does Theophilus tarry?" they questioned.

Antonia acted as spokesman. "He lost faith before God's mother had fully answered."

"But thou and Gaius didst stay and have brought us a message?"

"We have brought a message."

"Could she prove that he was God?"

"Very God of very God."

"Being a man and yet God, how could he be born?"

Antonia thought awhile, pondering what part of the miracle she should disclose first to restore conviction. Then she ceased to think, the marvel of her revelation gripping her. She was back on the hillside at Ephesus, bowed be-

fore Mary in the blazing sunshine. It was as though she were listening to her again. Her own lips began to move. The words she spoke were the words of Mary as she had told the Christmas story:

"There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord come upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid."

The gentle naturalness of the babe's divinity; the kings from the East acclaiming Him; even the oxen in their stalls sinking to their knees, dumbly acknowledging that He was God. And then the second visit to the Virgin. The tomb was empty. Nothing of mortality remaining save the whiteness of lilies.

Awe-struck the Christians heard her.

"And thou wast with me, Gaius," she turned to him.

But they required no corroboration.

"Very God of very God," they prostrated themselves in prayer. "Jesus, Thou art the only true God. We will live and die for Thee."

TO LOVE IS TO LAUGH

To Love Is to Laugh

"IT MUST be that I'm homesick." Posie addressed the Mediterranean. "No snow at Christmas—that's what's doing it. And yet, how silly to be homesick, when I've come so far to be happy!"

Her mind went back to the last Christmas—boys returning from Princeton, red wreaths in the windows, dances, parties. Last year she had been a débutante, with not a care in the world save which frock she should wear and which of her beaux she should favour. This

year she was a little American girl alone in the south of France.

"Nothing to be alarmed over," the doctors had said, "but it would be wiser to send her away for the winter."

Then a friend had suggested combining health with self-improvement.

"Why not learn a language? Go to Cannes and speak French."

She had jumped at the chance. Cannes had spelled romance—a kind of perpetual grand opera, blue skies, flashing seas, orange groves, guitars—perhaps a lover. To have a lover, a passionate fellow who would threaten to shoot himself for her, would be rather fun. It would be doubly fun without a family to watch over her. That spot on her lung had seemed the open sesame to adventure—it was the price for becoming cosmopolitan. She had left her New Jersey birthplace with the feeling that she didn't greatly care if she never again saw it. Even the Princeton boys had lost their fascination. "Good-bye, Angel Face," they had wrung their hands. "Angel Face" had been

Bob's name for her—the rest of them had borrowed it. Not one of them had proposed to her. She had hoped Bob would to the very last. It would have been a satisfaction to be allowed to refuse him. Because he hadn't it had been as though he had refused her. So she had sailed with scarcely a regret, a Miss Columbus in search of Europe. Regret had come later, when she had discovered her loneliness. In her present mood, on this foreign eve before Christmas, loneliness seemed the only thing she had discovered.

Rising from the bench on the Croisette—the fashionable promenade which curves like a young moon about the Bay of Cannes—she began to saunter back toward the harbour. The Croisette was deserted. She realized the reason, but she was reckless. The few strangers who passed hurried by with mufflers pressed against their mouths. It was the hour after sunset when the dazzled air, which had given health all day, had become dangerous as the breath of a swamp. An opalescent haze hung over everything—an uncanny twilight—which

had brought with it a sudden drop in temperature. The sea had turned mackerel gray, the sky livid. Palm gardens, mounting up hills that lined the shore, looked fantastic and nightmarish. The one cheerful spot in the blur of vagueness was the brilliantly lighted Casino. A mile away through the drifting melancholy, its shining windows winked and beckoned. People were dancing there. No snow at Christmas—not a soul with whom to talk.

"I'm cranky and wicked," she scolded herself. "I'm mad clean through with everything and everybody. There's not a speck of peace or good-will in my heart."

She had reasons for being mad; nothing had turned out as fancy had painted. No passionate adorer had threatened to shoot himself for her. She was farther from being loved than ever. Even on the Riviera Prince Charmings do not scrape acquaintance with unchaperoned girls who can produce no social sponsors. Daddy's money hadn't run to a chaperon. Friends from Paris, whom she had expected for Christmas, had cancelled the arrangement. Except for

the improvement in her health her entire programme had miscarried.

In the old walled town on the mound above the harbour twinkling lights were springing up. It stood aloof from the modern Cannes of gamblers and fashion makers, a relic of a sterner civilization. Humped beneath the weight of fading sky, it had been ancient when the Incas were being conquered. Swinging low over its turrets, stars shone serenely. The scene brought tears to her eyes—recollections of a contentment never visited yet familiar:

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!

Cattle in the stalls. The manger. Mary. Sunday evenings. Childish voices. Brothers and sisters clumped together, before any of them had dreamed of growing up. Snow on the ground—piles of it. A Christmas tree against the window with flickering candles. Bethlehem so vivid in each childish imagination! A little town on a hilltop, exactly like the one before her, except that she missed the blanket

of whiteness. A memory of when hearts had been simple, never doubting the world's kindness.

"Grown wiser," she sighed. "I wish I hadn't."

Her longing bridged the miles which severed her from home. What were people doing? The house crowded. School ended. Everyone excited, wrapping presents, decorating with holly. There would be a dance to-night—a new batch of débutantes. Would anyone remember her? And Bob—for which girl would he be buying flowers? Once he'd tried to kiss her. It was at the door, close on midnight, as she was letting him out. She'd been both glad and frightened. Running up the stairs she had met her father.

"Your mother's tired."

Poor old daddy! How reproachful he'd looked in his dressing gown! He'd had to sacrifice to send her abroad. There were the other children. But a spot on her lung—that was different. He'd had to do without the new car —had had to make the old one run. He'd been

quite unselfish and cheerful about it. But the amount he'd squeezed for her hadn't been sufficient. So many francs for a dollar! He fancied she was wallowing in money. Rather than tell him she'd mounted up and up the hotel, retrenching and retrenching, till at last she was in an attic, the neighbour of Russian countesses and domestics.

The Casino. Pushing through revolving doors, laughing couples. Women in costly wraps; men piloting them delicately. She turned away. If only Bob were with her!

No letter had arrived—no presents. The mail was delayed. Messages were certainly on the way; but it fed her melancholy to pretend she was neglected. From the sea front she wandered into the Rue d'Antibes, retracing her steps to her hotel. Shop windows were ablaze, tempting passers to extravagance. Here one could procure flowers, there perfumes, there laces. She played a game that Bob was with her—that they were in Cannes on their honeymoon. It was a game so charming that she risked the night air to loiter.

"And what shall we give to Angel Face? Our first married Christmas. Nothing sufficiently splendid."

They peered through the plate glass, she and her spectre lover. Jewellery? Too insincere. Flowers? Too perishable. Then what?

"It must be something I can keep for remembrance."

Everything had been dismissed as unworthy. She was within a few paces of her hotel. Before a toy shop she halted. As she gazed all the childishness which lurked beneath her womanhood welled up. Dolls. Cows. Cradles. Make-believe. Cynicism faded. In her heart she became little. There had been a Christmas Eve when her father had taken her on an eleventh-hour round of shopping. She had been five. Was it four or five? Not more than six, anyhow. She could remember the white streets, the glittering lamps, the pin-point stars —the magic of the excursion. They had paused before a toy shop, he squeezing her hand.

"Choose anything."

From all the magnificence she had chosen

a box that made music. He had given her money, urged her across the threshold, and from the pavement had watched her make the purchase. Suddenly she knew what she wanted. For the first Christmas in her life everyone seemed to have forgotten her. On this festival of childhood, when her own childhood was slipping from her, she wanted a box that made music. For remembrance.

"Je veux une boite qui fait de la musique," she demanded of the dark young man who came gliding from behind the counter.

"But certainly, mademoiselle," he replied in English, "a music box. We have many."

He led her at once to the most expensive.

"I don't want one so large. It's for a child," she invented, "almost a baby. If it were too heavy it would fall from her tiny hands."

"They are all for children, mademoiselle." His eyes glinted amusement. "We have no boxes for—how you say?—the grown-ups."

He spread before her a fresh selection. They were still expensive.

"These aren't the kind." She shook her head.

He seemed to sense her disappointment. "Perhaps Mademoiselle would tell me?"

"It was a little square one." She took him into her confidence. "It shone like silver—only of course it wasn't. On the top there was a picture—a country scene gaily coloured. And in the side it had a handle. When you turned it a cute little tune commenced." Then she saw how he was regarding her with friendly mockery—guessing, no doubt, that the present was for herself. She blushed furiously. "It must be cheap," she strove to master her confusion.

"But Mademoiselle should have said cheap. I have what she wants exactly."

He had. It seemed the old one recovered. Not that she remembered the old one in detail, but when he turned the handle it gave out the same sort of playful little tinkle. It seemed a bit of home, despite the fact that it could never have seen America—as though it had been rescued and after all these years was being magically restored.

"I'll take it." She snatched eagerly. "Please don't trouble to wrap it."

As she handed over the money she had the sensation that her father must be watching her proudly from the pavement. She actually gazed up and down the street for him as she made her exit.

A man about the age her father had been was passing, leading a little girl by the hand. Unconsciously she stooped to glance into the child's face, half expecting—— But whatever ghosts were abroad were keeping hidden inside her head. "This has gone too far. It's silly."

She was minded to throw the thing away. It was making her absurd. But she longed to hear the tinkling tune at leisure. The dark young man in the shop had only ground out a few sample bars. Already their air had escaped her. If she could be alone she could turn the handle, yield herself to the spell, listen to it from beginning to end. As she entered the hotel, she endeavoured to conceal what she carried; but Léon's eyes were sharp.

"Ha! Mademoiselle, she 'ave a *cadeau?*"

Léon was the porter. He had lost an arm in the war. There was very little she objected to Léon knowing. He had suffered. Because he had suffered he understood. He and she shared secrets. She had told him about her lung; he had confided to her that there were days when the ache in his shorn shoulder became intolerable. So she nodded.

"For a child."

In the hurried privacy of the elevator, as they ascended, he peeped at her hand.

"Eet make the *musique,* mademoiselle, *n'est-ce-pas?* Eet ees preety."

She examined it shyly.

"It *is* pretty," she assented. "Its prettiness attracted me. Hello! There's writing on the back. I can't read it. It's in French."

He halted the elevator between floors that she might show him.

"Eet ees the tune eet plays," he hazarded.

"But what is it called? Translate for me."

" 'To Love Is to Laugh.' "

They had reached the topmost story. At the

last moment she very nearly parted with her possession. She imagined herself surprising him, "I bought it for your little boy, Léon." Instead, she held out her hand, "A happy Christmas to-morrow."

"And *bon Noël* to you, mademoiselle."

As she opened the door of her attic room the darkness pounced, as a ruffian might have done who had been lying in wait for her. "You can't escape me. I'm your loneliness." Puff! The newly kindled flame of her happiness flickered.

She didn't attempt to turn on the electric light. Why should she? She knew the room too well. But in the darkness she could imagine that the attic was luxurious and that she was desired.

The scene framed by the window was incapable of improvement—no inventing on her part could enhance its loveliness. From below in the garden the brittle rustle of palms ascended. Arc lights, following the Croisette, were a far-flung rope of pearls. The Casino was a blazing jewel.

Posie knelt by the window, her face between her hands. Why had she become suddenly happy? She'd bought a music box in the Rue d'Antibes. Anyone could have bought it. Her motive had been that it reminded her of childhood.

"There, my dear!" she made an unconscious gesture. "See for yourself. Nothing's altered. No letters. No cables. No grounds whatsoever for this burst of optimism."

Her assurance was both true and false. Her attic was the rented perch of a transient; the change was in herself—a breathless expectancy. What was she expecting? It fluttered in her breast so fiercely that it almost hurt. She glanced at the music box.

"It can't be that." Then away, pretending to ignore it. "The Christmas madness. It's catching."

As in a dream she began to undress. She had not dined. She dared not face the family groups in the restaurant. To go to bed so early was ridiculous. Everything she had done had been ridiculous that evening.

One by one, tantalizing eagerness with slowness, she removed her garments. This time last year she had been putting on her rosebud frock—making herself irresistible. Bob had been coming for her. The memory had lost its power of torture. It seemed more an incident anticipated than a memory. She knew quite well the pleasure she was postponing. She slipped her feet into her *pantoufles,* fastened her dressing gown and seated herself before the mirror to brush her hair. To the childish face that stared back at her she nodded, "I'm aware of all your shortcomings, yet I approve of you." A pretty face—more pretty than beautiful. If it erred, its fault was that it was too babyish. "Nevertheless, I like you, darling." The eyes were blue and appealing. The mouth was quivery—the upper lip should have been longer. The nose was uptilted, as though it had been pushed against a wall. "So it has, Posie. You can't help that." The brows were distinctly gold—mere golden feathers. "Your hair is your glory." It scarcely reached below her shoulders—flaxen and curly. "If you

bobbed it, it would be a shame. As it is, you look more like a boy than a girl."

Angel Face they had called her. Was it because she was fair and ineffectual or because her features gazed heavenward? She was making a more than ordinarily fastidious toilet. There wasn't a soul in Cannes who cared. Having burnished her hair, she powdered her nose and set to work upon her nails. Her final act was to say her prayers: "Please God, make me a good girl and give me faith in the future."

At last! She squatted on the floor tailor fashion. It was really comic to have become so childish. The music box's doing! She examined the writing on the back: "To Love Is to Laugh." Not a doubt of it! When she had fancied that Bob was her conquest she had been always laughing. A wise person—the person who had written it. A woman's hand, if she were not mistaken. What kind of woman? An old one who could laugh no longer, because love was ended? And yet, perhaps, a young

one, whose foot rocked a cradle while her hands made toys to help her husband.

To change her thoughts she peeped at the picture on the top. A cunning picture, naïve as a nursery rhyme. Terribly crude, of course! Trees were green as parsley. The setting sun was scorching as a red-hot poker. The scene depicted a cottage, and a girl running down a garden path. Pressing against the gate, his arms outstretched, was a cherubic shepherd, wearing his hair after the fashion of little Lord Fauntleroy. An immense effort had been made to portray emotion. Evidently they were enamoured and about to renew their vows after a tragic parting. There was nothing to hint what had occasioned their rupture. Woolly sheep, large as elephants to make them conspicuous, dotted a hillside. If they were his sheep, as the crook seemed to indicate, the separation could not have been for long. But they had feared it was forever. The eyes of the girl doll were streaming. She wore the imbecile ecstasy of one who was willing to forgive anything. Perhaps she had hoped he would relent.

All day she must have watched him from behind her cottage window. Even in her despair of his coming she had dressed for him. Her skirt was scarlet and bulged like a balloon. She had a little white cap pinned to her blowy locks. Her bodice was of black velvet. Her adorer was her match for quaintness, attired in sky-blue knee breeches, a canary coloured jacket, and Tyrolese hat.

"So long as you both think you're splendid I should worry," Posie apostrophized them.

She almost expected them to acknowledge her graciousness—the girl doll by dropping a curtsey, the boy puppet by doffing his hat. Because they paid no heed she felt a trifle offended. They seemed as real to her as painted things had been in childhood. They were actual people; she was the shadow. If they would only stop ogling and get forward. Perhaps they were waiting for the music of "To Love Is to Laugh." With the first tinkle they would leap into each other's arms. And then what?

Dared she start the music? Why not? If she

saw they were going from her she could halt. She gave the handle a half turn. She grew bolder. It was for all the world like crystal gazing. Actual surroundings faded. Cannes ceased to exist for her. She was a little girl with frilly skirts and plump legs, sitting elfin and absorbed on the nursery floor. She could not see herself. She only guessed that she had gone back fifteen years. She guessed, because her heart felt so believing. She had attention for nothing save the picture. At the first merry tinkle everything began to stir—but quite feebly. *Lumpily,* that was the word. The huge sheep lifted up their heads and glanced back across their shoulders—but, oh, so ponderously, like sheep in a slow-motion cinema! A breeze fanned her cheeks, swaying trees and grass; the waking landscape seemed to yawn. She turned the handle harder. Sheep began to wander, but still like snails, scarcely perceptibly. She thought—was it fancy?—that behind the music she heard their plaintive baaing. Birds launched themselves from boughs and drifted oilily. She must grind faster to

make them flit naturally. Everything had sprung to life—the lovers last of all.

They had lost their artificial smiling. They were throbbing, breathing persons. The lovers were on the point of meeting. She couldn't make it turn at all. Everything in the picture jumped back to exactly where it had been before she had started. The landscape became rigid—a crude, sentimental daub.

"I'll rest and try again." While she rested she attempted to hum the air, but her recollection was of secret laughter.

"If I could only hum it, that might have the same effect."

Having gathered her strength, she commenced turning again, with the same result: the Bo-Peep girl and Boy-Blue shepherd were on the point of greeting when she was compelled to stop. When she tried to recover the tune she had forgotten it. And here was another curious happening: the moment there was no music, from being five years old she shot up till she was Angel Face and twenty.

Of the times she tried the experiment she

kept no record. Surely an odd occupation for the night before Christmas, this persistent playing of a music box! What would anyone conjecture who opened the door and saw her?

"No one will. It's locked."

Downstairs in the hotel festivities were in progress. From the palm garden she caught the jingle of harness and the snorting of cars. For some time an orchestra had been thumping. The hour must be growing late. Approaching midnight probably. Suppose she changed the tactics of her necromancy by conducting her experiment in the dark? Switching off the lights, she took the music box with her to bed.

Tinkle, tinkle! That was better. In the gloom walls fell back—everything expanded. The picture filled the attic, demolished it, usurped it. But still, when her hand grew tired, actuality asserted itself.

She tried closing her eyes and lying flat against the pillow. To her delight that was better. She could hold the picture now at the

point of its latest development till she mustered energy to go on. With the discovery she became lazy. She had solved the mystery and could explore at leisure. The entire night lay before her. She could unreel the lovers' story by instalments.

Of course they were lovers. The girl had lived alone in the cottage as long as she could remember. Because of having had no one to love she had never laughed. Over the hill, driving his flock before him, had come the shepherd. From her window she had watched him. In her warm bed at night she had been unable to sleep for thinking of him out there in the cold and dark. Then one morning she could see him no longer.

And now in strange, dreamlike fashion, Posie and the girl became one. Flinging her cloak across her shoulders, she went out daringly through a drifting veil of whiteness in search of him. She wandered bewildered, utterly directionless, till unexplained he rose from beneath her feet and stood before her.

He was Bob—no longer the shepherd in the picture.

He drew her down beside him into a soft white nest. The nest was made of woolly sheep, huddled warm and panting. His arm stole about her. She grew drowsy. Snow fell with a tinkling music—scarcely with a tune, for it had no air in its singing that was remembrable. It buried her beneath glistening flakes of laughter—she and Bob together. There was no coldness now, nothing but comfort.

The story leaped forward. It was summer when she wakened. With the absence of snow had come misunderstanding. Again Bob had become the shepherd. She watched him from the window. He was so busy guarding his flock on the hillside that he had no thought for her. He never looked her way; he might never have known her.

But at last, as in the music-box picture, he relented. Glancing from her cottage, she saw him at the gate. She tried to run to him and couldn't. Without her help she was sure the

gate would refuse to open. She was held fast like a statue. To help him—it was the only way in which she could help him—she laughed. If she hadn't he would have turned away forever, never guessing how desperately he was needed.

But when his arms had gone about her what happened? Tinkle, tinkle! Snow falling. The Christmas feeling. Whiteness. Softness. Woolly sheep with their warm backs pressed against her, the gentle heaving of their flanks and beating of their hearts. Bob's heart beating. Joy that was suffocating.

The picture faded, only to begin again, moving in a circle. New details were added. The ending never varied; snow and laughter. She was holding the music box beneath the bedclothes safe against her breast.

Her eyes were opening. Where was she? Christmas morning! Sleepily she sent her feet groping for parcels—the rustling of paper would betray their presence. None on the bed —they must be in her stockings. She peeped

above the sheets. No stockings. Her hand gripped the music box. Her only Christmas present! She had had to give it to herself.

Through sunlit stillness church bells were calling: "To love is to laugh."

Precious little to laugh about! And yet she wanted to laugh. Perhaps by thinking of receiving she was starting at the wrong end. If she were to think of giving——

But she'd bought no presents, and if she had, on whom could she bestow them in this land of strangers? She turned the handle of the music box, hoping that might help her. A child's toy! Its magic had vanished.

As though she were late for an engagement she rose hurriedly and set about dressing. Now and then she glanced at the mirror. She had changed since yesterday. There was nothing to account for the singing in her heart.

"I ought to be miserable. I'm not."

Having adjusted her hat she made for the door—but halted, conscious that she had forgotten something. The music box! It looked

so lonely there on the dressing table. Snatching it, she took it with her.

The hotel was unusually silent: either everybody was late or the hour was early. She pressed the bell for the elevator without a response. Very early—that was the explanation. So much the better. No one would notice her. But she must hasten or she would miss—— It was uncanny, this certainty that she had an appointment.

She was in the Rue d'Antibes—a tunnel of golden quiet. Not a vehicle moving. Shop windows shuttered. Round a corner came a shuffling of feet—little feet. She guessed they were little before she saw them. They straggled into sight, the solemn-faced mites on their way to church, holding hands, marching two and two, the nuns like shepherdesses behind them. Posie recognized the procession. It was from the orphanage. She flattened herself against the wall.

At its head the tiniest child was marching. His eyes resting on her—his big innocent eyes, such as a little Jesus—— And yet they were

resting not so much on her as on the thing she was holding.

She stooped and knelt, pressing the music box into the baby's hands.

She had loved. Joy rose in a bubbling laugh. The little feet passed on.

THE SEVENTH CHRISTMAS

The Seventh Christmas

I

IT WAS the Seventh Christmas. In the village of Nazareth, which some say means "Flowery," all the children save one had wakened that morning quite unexcited and without any hope of presents. Grown people had gone as usual about their daily work. All the shops were open. No one felt any kinder than was ordinary. No one said, "Seven years ago to-day Jesus was born in Bethlehem." No one had forgiven his enemy, for it was not over Nazareth that the

angels had sung "Peace, good-will toward men." Had you wandered down that quiet village street, where no snow had fallen and no windows were decorated with holly, where sandal-footed girls were coming out from houses balancing pitchers on their heads, you would never have guessed that it was the morning of the Seventh Christmas.

Even in the carpenter's cottage, where the little Jesus dwelt, his father and mother seemed to have forgotten. And perhaps his father had, for bread was hard to earn. But his mother, though she did not show it, had remembered. On this day, of all days, she pondered in her heart the wonders that had been foretold about her son at his birth. On this day, of all days, she watched for the angels to return. But the wonders were long in commencing, and had she told any of her neighbours the miracle that had happened at Bethlehem they would have thought it an idle tale she had invented.

Though she had remembered that it was Jesus's birthday, she was ashamed to own it,

for she had no present for him and scarcely any food in the house. So, when the one child in Nazareth, the only child in all the world who knew that it was Christmas, had awakened that morning, it had seemed to him that the world did not care. At first he was disappointed; but when he saw the trouble in his mother's eyes he sang to make her glad.

Before the day was ended something was sure to happen; something unexpected always did happen on his birthdays. Two years ago a shepherd had come all the way from Bethlehem, a four days' journey, carrying a lamb in his bosom. Still longer ago, before he could remember, someone had given him three golden caskets. His mother took care of them; she had never let him see inside them, and she had never told him their story. His father, Joseph, had been offered much money for them; but though they were poor his mother had always refused to sell.

All day he had waited for the unexpected to occur. As he helped his father at the carpenter's bench he watched his mother seated in

the doorway, clad in her striped robe and wrapped in a white linen shawl as in a shroud. Every time a camel train shuffled by, stirring up the dust on the road to Damascus, he could hear the coins jingle on her forehead. She, too, was waiting—for what, he wondered.

The day dragged on. There was no midday meal. His seventh birthday and no one had remembered! What did the birthday of a little boy matter when times were so hard in Nazareth? It was winter; flowers had perished from the fields; brooks were white with dashing water; a bleak look was over everything, and work was scarce. Younger carpenters were always passing down to the coast towns with the caravans; they were glad to ply their trade for the smallest hire. Joseph could not compete with them. He could no longer stoop for his tools or move quickly. If no one was at hand to remember for him he would often make mistakes in his measurements; then all the materials that he had worked upon were wasted. So Mary used to send the little Jesus with Joseph when people wanted to give him

orders for doors, and milk pails, and beds, and chests. But because he was so often in error they wanted him less frequently; when they did they beat him down in price because he was infirm.

"Ah, friend Joseph," they would say, "thou wast once a good carpenter before thou didst journey into Egypt. The hot roads robbed thee of thy strength. If thou hadst only stayed in Nazareth——"

As Joseph turned away the little Jesus would look up into his dim eyes and question, "Why didst thou not stay in Nazareth, Father?"

And his father would reply, as though defending himself, "It was for thy sake that I went."

"And did I go with thee? And was it there that they did give me the golden caskets?"

But the old man would shake his head. "Perchance it was a dream. When thou art a man thou mightest laugh at me if to-day I were to tell."

Because Joseph was so old there were times when he would fall asleep over his work; he

gave the little Jesus orders always to stay near him to awake him. Then Jesus would try to bring comfort, saying, "I will grow up quickly, Father; when I am a man thou shalt rest." But his mother, who was young and more beautiful than any of the mothers of Nazareth, would show fear at his words and clasp him to her, whispering, "Nay, little son, thou shalt be a child for long years yet."

So it had gone on, and as Joseph's strength had failed him they had grown poorer, till now, on the Seventh Christmas, there was no food left in the carpenter's house. All day Joseph had toiled ceaselessly and Jesus had done his best to help, that the ox yoke might be finished by evening and they might have the money to buy bread. All day Mary had sat in the doorway gazing up and down the sunlit village street, listening and watching. At times she would turn her eyes into the shop and ask a question: "And they sang 'Glory in the highest,' so the shepherds said. Was it not so, Joseph?"

"It was so, if we did not dream it."

He answered as one who was sure of nothing; as he bent his head, his white beard caught up the chips that lay upon the bench.

"But the gifts from the East—the golden caskets; they are proofs. We still have them."

"Aye. They are worth a king's ransom. Merchants going down to Damascus would purchase. Wilt thou not consent? If we were to sell——"

Her eyes rested on him sorrowfully—the soft, dark eyes of a woman who had lived always in loneliness.

"A king's ransom! And shall we sell the ransom of our King without his knowing?"

She turned her gaze back to the village street, still desperately hoping. He should rule over nations and sit upon the throne of David. That was what angels, shepherds, rich strangers had declared in Bethlehem on the night of his birth. Since that first Christmas there had been no more signs or portents—only escapes, long journeys, and uneventful poverty. It was as though with his birth the clouds had sealed up the stairway to the heavens and God had

forgotten. No wonder Joseph was half persuaded that all the prophecies had been imagined. To the three golden caskets Mary's faith clung. At any moment royal messengers might come riding from Jerusalem to take her son away and crown him. Far down the road through bare olive groves, she would see the smoke of their chariots. She had the little robe ready, which she had worked for him secretly in silk and silver thread. But if they were to come and the caskets were sold, how would they know that Jesus was the king for whom they were seeking?

And yet Joseph was weak for want of bread. With the money that merchants would give them for the caskets they might live all their lives in plenty.

Seeing that his parents' hearts were troubled, again the little Jesus sang, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." From gray hillsides, where shepherds sat among their flocks, the bleating of sheep answered. Women passing by to draw water at the well and lean camel drivers of a halted caravan paused to stare

in at the carpenter's shop, arrested by the boy's clear singing. Their glances travelled from Jesus to his mother. "Blessed art thou among women," their eyes said. Then Mary felt rich, though she was hungry and had given her son no present.

As the day faded and shadows lengthened boys gathered about the doorway, crying to Jesus to come out among the cypresses and play at "kings" with them. He smiled gravely and shook his head. As they went away he followed their voices out past the threshing floor to the wide, sweet silences where brooks babbled, and in summer time the country was golden with oranges and silver with the quivering leaves of the olives. There, had he gone with them, they would have spread their sheepskin coats for a throne, and he would have sung to them. They would have plaited a crown and set it on his head as though he had been Herod. He would have moulded sparrows out of clay for them, so like to life that it seemed he had but to toss them in the air for them to spread their wings and vanish. When evening was a

blue smoke blown among the sheepfolds and lights were twinkling in windows of Nazareth, they would have brought him back, riding on their shoulders and shouting before him. But the ox yoke was not yet finished. Their voices died out in the distance.

"I am too old. I cannot."

The tools fell from Joseph's hands. For a moment he swayed above the carpenter's bench; then, gathering his cloak before his face, he slipped to the bed of shavings that strewed the floor and slept.

"Thou must wake him as he bid thee," Mary whispered.

Jesus bent over him. "He is weary. Would that I were a man; then would I finish the yoke myself."

"But thou art still a child, and there is no bread in the house. Thou must wake him."

Jesus stood up and spread abroad his arms; the shadow of the cross fell behind him. Mary covered her eyes with her hands. Jesus ran to her and threw his arms about her. "See, I will sit beside thee and protect thee; but he shall

rest. Hadst thou forgotten, Mother?—this day I am seven and nearly a man."

"Little one, I had not forgotten; but all day my heart hath ached for thee. I have nothing that I can give thee. I had hoped that thou hadst not remembered."

He laid his face against her breast. The memory of the cross faded. Again he was the tiny babe with whom she had fled into strange countries, seeing nothing of the perils that beset her because of the hopes she had had.

Once more beneath the sunset she cast her eyes along the road, watching for the smoking wheels of chariots. The road was empty; the heavens silent. No sign save the cross had been vouchsafed to her of the promised splendours.

Slowly, like sheep following into a meadow, the stars came out. One by one, in windows of the village street, lights were extinguished. The closing of doors and rustling of lowered curtains were heard. The chill of the Eastern December night crept into the air. In the darkness, at the back of the carpenter's shop, Jo-

seph slept. It seemed in that shuttered world that of all those faithful ones who had greeted the babe at Bethlehem she alone was left to worship. They had given him gold and frankincense then; but now——

Did he slumber? She glanced down; through the dusk his eyes were gazing up at her. She remembered her own girlhood and the excitement of her birthdays. He should not be disappointed. She must give him something; but what, when she was so poor that she could not even give him bread?

II

"Art thou sleepy?"

He shook his head against his mother's breast. He had been listening to the bleating of the sheep; it was like waves beating among the misty hills. Far beyond white walls of the village, as far as eyes could reach, he could see the blur of sheepfolds, the glow of camp fires and the shadowy outlines of watchful figures standing crook in hand beneath the stars. He was thinking of the song that had

been with him all day, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Lest he should feel the cold, his mother drew him closer, spreading her linen shawl about him like a tent.

"When thou playest at 'kings' with the village boys, thou art always the King—is it not so?" she whispered. "I will tell thee the story of a king who was born on the same day as thou wast."

"Then to-day will be his birthday?"

She smiled in the darkness. "To-day he too is seven. It is a very marvellous story."

"A true story?"

"A true story, but so marvellous that thou mightest not believe it were it not I who told thee."

Jesus remembered Joseph's words, "When thou art a man thou mightest laugh at me if to-day I were to tell thee." He sat very breathless, for he knew that now he was to learn why his father had taken that long journey into Egypt. And he thought that if he listened intently he might learn whence had come the mysterious golden caskets which his mother

would not sell though much money had been offered.

"I, Mary, knew the mother of this king." Her lips trembled against his cheek, and her voice came tenderly. "Doth it seem strange to thee, little Jesus, that thy mother should have known the mother of a king? Every morning and evening with the village girls she would go to draw water at the well. As she went down the street with her empty pitcher she had to pass a carpenter's shop. The carpenter would pause in his work to smile up at her; sometimes, when she was returning, he would lay aside his tools and step out to gaze after her. There came a day when he took the pitcher from her hand. 'It is too heavy for thee,' he said. After that, whenever he saw her returning, he would carry the brimming pitcher for her. But this, all this was before the King's coming and is not what I meant to tell thee."

She ceased; in the quiet of her heart she was dreaming to herself that part of the story.

"One evening," she said, "when the air was sweet with flowers, she was sitting alone in her

garden. In the stillness she heard a rush of wings, like to the sound of swallows darting. With the sound of wings came a light that was dazzling. When she looked up, standing in the path before her was an angel who had been sent to her from God."

Jesus pressed against her eagerly. "And did he tell her aught of the golden caskets?"

Mary laughed gently. Remembering had made her happy, so that she had forgotten her poverty. Stooping, she kissed the uplifted face. "Nay, be patient. The golden caskets come later. He told her that she should be the mother of a king and that among women she should be called blessed; for the King when he came should be the Son of God, and should bring love into the world."

"To be the mother of a king must be very blessed." The little boy spoke gravely. "And after that, Mother, what did he tell her?"

"Spreading his wings, he flew away till the flash of his going grew faint above the palm trees in the gold of the sunset. Next morning the carpenter watched for her to pass;

when she did not go to draw water at the well he came in search of her. She was still sitting where the angel had left her, gazing straight before her; for, as thou sayest, to be the mother of a king is very blessed, but it is very terrible to be the mother of the Son of God. Then the carpenter asked her why she had not been to draw water. Now, though he was a good man, he had never seen an angel; and so, when she told him——"

Behind, in the darkness, Joseph stirred. "I cannot," he muttered; "I cannot." In his dreams he was still troubled because the ox yoke was unfinished. Through the shadows Mary spoke to him. Sighing like a child, he ceased from his muttering and slept peaceably.

"And because he had never seen an angel?" Jesus questioned.

Mary turned back from gazing into the dimness of the shop. "Because he was a good man he came to understand at last. Through the summer, while the oranges were yellowing, they lived very happily. In the evenings, in

the garden where the angel had appeared to her, the carpenter carved a royal cradle, with cherubim upon it, and she wove robes in preparation for the King's coming. It was in the winter, just before he was expected, that a decree went out from Cæsar Augustus that all the world should go, everyone to his own city, to be taxed. Having closed his shop, the carpenter bought an ass and set the mother of the unborn King upon it."

"Was it not a camel, Mother, all covered with gold and purple, such as princes from far countries ride when they pass through Nazareth to the bazaar at Damascus?"

She bowed her head. It was the question she herself would have asked. "It is a true story," she whispered, "and very marvellous—more marvellous as it goes on. The mother of God's son set out riding on an ass, and the carpenter walked beside her with his staff. Roads were thronged with merchants and soldiers and caravans—with people travelling like the carpenter, everyone to his own city, to be taxed. As the mother of God's son passed no one noticed

her. Men in the fields did not look up from their ploughing. Often the carpenter would have to draw the ass aside lest she should be splashed by the wheels of a chariot. She watched them all; she had never known that there were so many people in the world. 'All these my son shall rule,' she thought.

"Through the rose gardens of Jericho she travelled, till on the fourth day, as the sun was setting, Jerusalem blazed up like a golden temple. 'It is here that he will come to be crowned,' she thought; 'perchance it is here he will be born.'

"But Jerusalem was crowded, and the carpenter had kinsfolk in Bethlehem, which was but a six miles' journey; so, though she was weary and the ass stumbled in his steps and the carpenter's feet were sore, they left the domes of Jerusalem behind them and hurried on."

Mary sighed at the remembered pain of that Hebron road, the jolting of the rough track through the mountains, and the forlornness of her thoughts.

Jesus lifted up his arms, drawing down his

mother's face to him. Thus they sat in silence. "Had I been there, I would have helped thee," he said at last.

"Thou!" She peered into his eyes, frightened by his quietness. "Little Jesus, thou hast guessed?"

It was as though, beneath the gay seriousness of his childishness, he had always known that he was the Son of God. The earthly mother in her shrank from the thought, as she had shrunk from the shadow of the cross. It made him too little hers in making him so largely God's.

"There is much that thou canst not understand," she faltered. "Some day, when thou art older——"

"Yet tell me," he pleaded. "Am I not nearly a man? To-day I am seven."

"Yea, to-day thou art seven, and I have no present for thee; therefore I will tell thee. It was growing dark as we climbed up to Bethlehem; far away in the clouds, like a white palace hewn from the moonlight, it shone. Every window was illumined, and all along the road we met travellers turning back. 'There

is no room,' they called to us, 'no room.' But Joseph pressed forward, for he had kinsfolk living there; he thought they would take pity on my necessity. We came to the last ascent and the gateway; we entered. He went from door to door, inquiring for shelter, that I might find rest. His kinsfolk and friends with one accord began to make excuses: 'If we had but known of thy coming; if thou hadst but arrived earlier.' Even at the inn there was no place left for us. When my strength was gone, hard by the courtyard of the inn we found a cave in the rocks, where cattle were stalled. The kindly beasts made way for us, and there, on such a starry night as this is, thou—thou who shalt be ruler over all the world, wast born."

He raised himself in her lap, leaning against her breast and turning her face toward him. "Dost thou believe it?"

Again the question that oppressed her heart! "Why dost thou ask?"

His child's eyes reached up to hers through the dark. "Because we are poor."

"I was poor then." Her voice broke and sank.

"I was Mary of Nazareth, as I am now. Ah, but I believed it, for there were signs, and portents, and wonders in the heavens! Yea, and I still believe it. Have I not treasured all these memories in my heart? I wrapped thee in swaddling clothes and laid thee in a manger because there was no room for thee in the abodes of men—no room for the Son of God! Come near to me, little Jesus. When I hold thee so I can still believe that I, Mary of Nazareth, am rich and blessed. For seven long years, as many years as thou art, I have kept silent; but now I will tell thee.

"There were shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks that night. Dost thou remember how one of them came to Nazareth, a four days' journey, bringing thee a lamb in his arms? And lo, as they watched their flocks, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not. For, behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all nations. For unto

you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.'

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men.'

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.' And they came with haste and found thee lying in the manger.

"Scarcely had they departed when a great clamour of trumpets rose upon the night, and the sound of men beating upon doors and demanding, 'Where is he that is born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship.'

"So Joseph stepped out from the cave among the rocks and looked down into the courtyard.

There he saw a train of camels, caparisoned in gold and purple, like to the camels on which princes ride when they go through Nazareth to the bazaar at Damascus. And from all their necks hung bells that tinkled, and the men who sat upon them waved torches. So great was the company that it spread like a river beneath the city gate and far down the hill. At the head of it rode three kings with shining crowns, and their servants beat upon the doors and shouted, 'Where is he that is born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship.'

"Then the householders rose from sleep and looked out from their windows. 'There hath been no king in Bethlehem, my lords, since David.'

"And the master of the inn opened his door, lest his guests should be disturbed and made angry. 'No king hath been born in Bethlehem,' he said, 'but, perchance, in Jerusalem it may have happened.'

"Then the three lords lifted up their arms and pointed. 'It hath led us from the East,'

they chanted; 'for many nights it hath moved before us.'

"And while they yet spake, a star was let down from heaven and came to rest like a lantern above the cave where thou wast lying.

" 'It is naught but a hole in the rocks where beasts are stalled,' said the innkeeper.

"But when the three kings saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy and made haste to descend from their camels. And when they were come into the cave and saw thee lying in my arms as I sat among the oxen, they fell on their faces and worshipped.

" 'My lords, whence are ye come to me?' I asked.

"Then they uncovered their faces. And I saw that one was a boy, smooth of face and ruddy of countenance. And one was a man in the power of his strength, tanned by the desert and black bearded. One was white as snow, with eyes that blazed like fires, and so old that his voice was like a reed shaken. And it was he who answered.

" 'Mother of mothers, from the East have we journeyed, and all the gods of Persia have called thee blessed. Long have we waited for thy son to be born, for our prophet, Zoroaster, foretold his coming; and we have a book, which bears the name of Seth the son of Adam, wherein all things are written concerning the star. And in the land of Persia we have a temple, in which are kept the images of our gods and goddesses. On the night on which the star, long awaited, appeared, all our gods and goddesses were heard talking together; in the morning, when we entered the temple, all the images were fallen on their faces. Then we rode forth, following the star. Hither we have come bearing presents.'

"Then three slaves appeared, each standing behind his lord and bearing in his arms a golden casket. And the oldest lord took from his slave his casket and lifted therefrom a crown, which he set upon thy forehead, saying, 'This crown I give unto thee for Power. The gold whereof it is made consisteth of thirty pieces, which were a funeral offering unto Adam. It

was carried with his body in the Ark, and afterward was coined by Terah. It was for these pieces, also, that Joseph was sold into Egypt by his brethren. Next they were paid as tribute unto Pharaoh, and with them Joseph bought from Sheba the perfumes for the body of his father, Jacob. In after times the Queen of Sheba made a present of them unto Solomon, and so they remained at Jerusalem till Israel was carried captive into Babylon. Now that thou art come, the East yields them back to thee.

"Then the second lord, who was black bearded, took from his slave his casket; and when he had opened it there stole forth a sweet fragrance. 'This frankincense,' he said, and his voice was like a strong wind blowing, 'the East yields unto thee for worship.'

"Then the third lord, who was smooth of face, with the foreboding of youth in his eyes, took tremblingly from the hands of his slave his casket, and his voice was like the weeping of a woman."

Mary fell silent. Slowly, one by one, her tears crept down till they fell upon the face of Jesus.

"Mother, tell me—nay, Mother, thou didst promise."

" 'From the East,' he said, 'I bring thee myrrh, which signifieth Death—a gift to every man of woman born.'

"Then they each one took thee in his arms and gazed very wonderingly. On account of the smallness of my means I gave unto them one of thy swaddling bands, which those great lords received with every mark of reverence. And when they had bidden thee farewell they would not go into the inn because it had refused to give thee shelter; but they tethered their camels in the courtyard, and they raised their tents beneath the stars. While they slept an angel appeared unto them, saying, 'Get thee up, and depart swiftly another way.' So they arose and set out for the ships at Tarshish; by morning they were gone. And the same angel spake unto Joseph in a dream, 'Arise. Take the

young child and escape into Egypt; for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.'

"And we straightway fled, taking with us the golden caskets. As we hurried along, I riding on the ass and Joseph walking with his staff, soldiers came marching from Jerusalem and entered into Bethlehem, inquiring diligently for a holy child which had been born. And when they found thee not they put all children that were in Bethlehem to the sword. From the white city on the mountain height a cry went up—women weeping for their children, who would not be comforted because they were not.

"In Egypt work was hard to find; the roads were hot, and Joseph grew old through poverty. Homesickness came upon us for Nazareth, for its olive groves, its sheepfolds, and its shadowy twilights. Then word came to us that Herod was dead and that Archelaus reigned in the room of his father. So we returned to the carpenter's shop, with naught left to us of all these glories save only the golden caskets. The rest—the rest thou knowest."

III

From behind them the breathing of Joseph came softly. Upon the face of Jesus the tears of Mary fell.

He sat as one entranced, awe-struck and smiling, thinking of the three great Persian lords, and of the many camels which were like a river, and of the waving torches. Whither had they sailed in the ships from Tarshish, and had the star, which was like a lantern, still gone before them? Then he thought of Herod, and of the old age that Egypt had brought upon Joseph.

"I was so small; wherefore did he wish to kill me?"

"Because of the question that the lords had asked, calling thee the King of the Jews."

"It is the game at which I play with the village boys. Mother, but am I——?"

She pressed her lips against him to silence them. "Thou art a child, the son of Mary. Herod was not good; he feared lest God should wrest his throne from him."

Jesus laughed, holding up his hands in the moonlight and spreading wide his fingers.

Mary took his hands and bent over him. "Why dost thou laugh?"

"Because they are so small; yet thou sayest that he feared them. Archelaus is King of the Jews, while I lack bread. Mother, dost thou think that when I am a man I shall wrest his throne from him?"

"Hush!" She clutched him to her. "Say no more. Say nothing of what I have told thee. If any should have heard thee—— Thou art young. Think no more of it. Let it be as a dream that thou wilt forget shortly."

"But it was no dream. Thou didst say it was no dream."

"Nay, it was no dream," she whispered.

A true story! He sat in thought. He, who wore a sheepskin coat and helped in the carpenter's shop and went about with Joseph remembering his measurements—he was the Son of God.

"It is my seventh birthday," he said; "let me look into the golden caskets."

In the barrenness of the present her heart cried out for such a confirmation of the glories that were past. Rising, she entered the shop on tiptoe for fear of waking Joseph. From the place where she had hidden them in readiness for the arrival of charioteers and horsemen who should summon her son to his crowning, she brought them forth; with them she brought the royal robe that she had woven. In the shuttered street, with nothing stirring save the distant flocks and none to watch her save the stars, she put the robe upon him. When, looking down at the kingly shadow that he cast, his eyes danced with gladness and he clapped his hands childishly, she caught his excitement. How often she had longed to array him in these splendours! Surely to-night, late though it was, some sign would come to tell her that God's angels still kept guard. Tremblingly opening the first casket, she drew forth the crown and set it shining on his forehead. "It is for Power," she said. From the second she drew forth the frankincense and scattered it upon his raiment. "It is for Worship." But the third casket, con-

taining the gift which signifieth Death, she did not open.

As she watched him on the threshold of the carpenter's shop, palely attired, with the moonlight throwing a halo round him, the sorrow of her long waiting was forgotten. Her thoughts fled back to the garden of her girlhood and the angel who had come to her out of the sunset. It was enough, though all the world was careless, that she was left faithful. Falling on her knees, with her arms about him, she sang whisperingly the hymn of her thankfulness: "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things—hath done to me great things——"

Her faith stumbled; suddenly she remembered that her child was hungry—her child, whom she shared with God. Then, because he was smiling, she took new courage, "and holy is his name."

She had sung thus far when Jesus held up his hand, listening and saying nothing. At first she thought he had heard Joseph stirring; the

sound of a man sleeping still fell gently. She turned her head, supposing that in the street he had seen someone coming. Then she, too, heard it—the thud-thud-thudding of a swiftly approaching camel and a voice which panted on the night, "Where is he?—Where is he?" The question got no farther, for the breath of the rider came sobbingly.

Through olive groves, bare of leaves, a dromedary came racing, swaying and staggering from weariness. It was the kind that princes ride when they pass through Nazareth to the bazaar at Damascus; but it came unfollowed and solitary. From its neck hung a silver bell which tinkled. It was caparisoned in purple and gold; but the purple had faded and the gold was tarnished. Upon it sat a man, gaunt and haggard, whose raiment was gray with the dust of travel. He leant peering forward; his throat was parched, so that at times when his lips moved he uttered nothing.

Urging his beast, he rode past the threshing floor and commenced the ascent into Nazareth. Between shuttered houses, casting his eyes from

side to side, he whispered as he approached, "Where is he?—Where is he?" As though he had been the survivor of a lost army, the memory of defeat clung upon him.

Kneeling beside Jesus, Mary watched. All day she had waited for ambassadors and lordly caravans, for a repetition of that first miraculous Christmas; now, while the world slept, came this lonely man, fleeing through the night like a shadow. He seemed half blind. He would have gone by the carpenter's shop, but Mary rose to her feet. He halted.

"Where is he who is born King of the Jews?" he questioned hoarsely. "Once, when I was young, on such a night as this I found him. To-night there are many stars, but no star to guide me."

She came out from the shadow and stared up into the face of the stranger. "Whence art thou?"

Bending down from his dromedary, he gazed at her puzzled, as though she brought memories. "From the East," he whispered; his voice was like the sound of a woman sobbing.

"We had waited so long, I who was young, and Melchior who was old, and Balthazar who was midway between us. At last we found him, and all the gods of Persia fell upon their faces and called him blessed. Again we have waited. We have lost him, and the East grows doubting; for the world hath not changed from what it was. It seems a dream—all that we thought once happened. Melchior is dying; he longs for certainty. So with no star to guide me, because my faith is greatest, I, who am the youngest of we three kings, have journeyed forth. Where is he who is born King of the Jews? If thou canst tell me, I will give thee—— But I can give thee nothing, for I have spent my all in the searching. Out of kindness canst thou tell me?"

Mary turned her head, glancing back across her shoulder. The gaze of the youngest lord followed. Gropingly he descended. His eyes met the eyes of the child. In the moonlight he saw the crown which shone upon his forehead, the white robe which garbed him, and the three golden caskets, two of them open, which lay

at his feet before him. The fragrance of frankincense stole upon the air, making the night a temple.

"It is true. It is true. It was no dream."

Running forward he would have bowed himself in worship, but something stopped him. Was it his own loneliness, or the loneliness of the childish kingly figure? Instead, he took him in his arms.

"I came to thee before with a lordly train and trumpets blowing," he whispered; "now I come to thee stained with the dust of travel and empty-handed. What is there I can give thee?"

Jesus stroked the haggard face. "It is my seventh birthday, and my mother is hungry."

From about his waist the lord unloosed a pouch in which were bread and dates. Sitting in the doorway of the carpenter's shop, he spread them out before Jesus and his mother.

"Were I in my own country," he said, "I would give thee a palace of white marble, with fountains playing and hanging gardens and

slaves to serve thee. Here I am poor; but such as I have I give thee."

When the meal was ended they talked, and Jesus laughed and sang to them; but always softly, for fear of disturbing Joseph. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." And he taught his song to the young lord that when he returned to his own people he might say, "It is thus that the little Jesus singeth."

The night wore on. The Persian lord would have stayed till morning for the delight he had in holding the son of Mary. But Mary reminded him, "Melchior is old and dying. It is a long journey. What can we send to him to make him certain?"

Then they thought of the crown; but he himself had given it and might be offended. And they thought of the frankincense; but that was all gone. There was nothing in the shop to send him save the carpenter's tools, which would prove nothing; moreover, Joseph would need them for finishing the ox yoke in the morning.

The child spoke: "Let us send him the third casket, for it hath not been opened."

"Nay," said Mary, for she knew what it contained: myrrh, which signifieth Death—a gift to every man of woman born.

But Jesus freed himself from the arms of the young lord and brought it to him. "I will open it," he said, "and look just once, for it was thy gift to me."

When he raised the lid, a dazzling light burst forth, so that all save Jesus were blinded. But Jesus clapped his hands and laughed, for instead of the gift which signifieth Death out from the casket drifted the star. When the Persian lord saw it floating up into the heavens, he fell on his knees and worshipped.

"The star which we had lost!" he cried. "The star which we had lost!"

Halting above the carpenter's shop, dimming even the moon by the brightness of its shining, it waited for him to follow.

Holding the hand of Jesus, Mary stood gazing down the village street, watching him depart. Directly he was mounted the star

moved eastward toward the dawn, going to bring faith to the dying eyes of Melchior. Only once, when at the point of vanishing the Persian lord drew up to wave his hand, did it stay its march across the heavens.

When the thudding of the dromedary had died out in the olive groves, they returned to the doorway of the carpenter's shop. As they sat there in the grayness of the morning Mary slumbered, and the little Jesus drew her robe about her to keep her warm. Then he took the crown from off his forehead and set it back in its casket. And he took off his kingly garment and put on his sheepskin jacket; for he knew that soon the people of Nazareth would be stirring, and they would wonder to see him thus apparelled. And he said to himself, "I am nearly a man. Am I not seven?" So he did what he had never done before—he took Joseph's tools, and he worked upon the ox yoke.

Now when Mary wakened and remembered, she thought she had been dreaming. But when she searched for the third casket, which had

contained the gift that signifieth Death, it was gone.

While she was still troubled in her spirit, Joseph awoke, uttering a glad cry, and called her to him. By the bench she found him marvelling, for the ox yoke was finished and the little Jesus lay asleep on the shavings in the corner.

Bending over the childish hands, she saw that they were blistered with toil for her. Then she fell to smiling and weeping. "Of a truth," she whispered, "he is the Son of God."

THE END